

OUR YOUNG AEROPLANE SCOUTS IN ITALY

By HORACE PORTER



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WITH THE AEROPLANES HOVERING OVER THE GORGE, BILLY AND HENRI QUICKLY REALIZED THAT IN THEIR PRESENT EXPOSED POSITION THEY WOULD BE EASY MARKS FOR THE FLYING GUNNERS.

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Our Young Aeroplane Scouts

(Registered in United States Patent Office)

In Italy

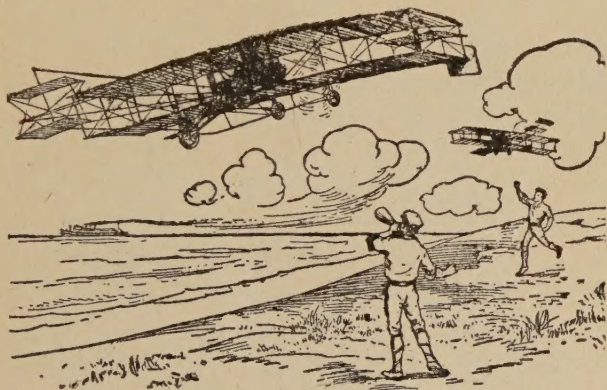
OR

Flying With the War Eagles of the Alps

By HORACE PORTER

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"Our Young Aeroplane Scouts in France and Belgium," "Our Young Aeroplane Scouts in Germany," "Our Young Aeroplane Scouts in Russia," "Our Young Aeroplane Scouts in Turkey," "Our Young Aeroplane Scouts in England."



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CHAPTER I.

FIRST FLIGHT WITH THE WAR EAGLES.

AUSTRIAN aero bombs had fallen with a vengeance upon Venice, that great city on the Adriatic, and beautiful sculptures of the world-known Church of the Scalzi lay in heaps of rubbish in the ruins of the famous old structure.

No Austrian troops, neither foot nor horse, had advanced on Italian soil, but over northern Italy had flown the empire's aircraft, and upon the ancient floating city of the Doges and, too, Verona inland had been inflicted frightful downpours of explosive shrapnel and that newer terror, the asphyxiating or poison gas projectiles.

Near the tottering walls of one of the art monuments of the world, where was most in evidence the destructive force of rending aerial shells, stood a little group of viewers, the central figure of which was an Italian officer, marked with the insignia of a colonel, who occasionally shifted his position to

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get a better uplook at some workmen already engaged aloft in the work of salvage and repair.

Of the others in the party, two were also in uniform, but without strap or sleeve decoration, handsome fellows, though, of swarthy complexion, and of alert and restless movement. The fourth and fifth members of the group were trim-built lads, still attired in the yellowish, dirt-colored khaki of the just previous heroic service from which they had been hastily withdrawn to expertly aid this ally behind the bulwark of the Alps in aerial campaign against the foe that was so fiercely striking from above.

Our Young Aeroplane Scouts in Italy—here they were, with all the vim and snap and high courage which had carried them through innumerable adventures in varied climes and under the colors of about all the fighting nations—Billy Barry, Bangor, U. S. A., and his particular chum and flying partner, Henri Trouville.

From the chilling fogs of London and the misty upper ranges of the Channel and the North Sea, within the week they had met the sunny smile of Naples, backed by the vision of rolling hills covered with vineyards and olive groves, and over all the mighty Vesuvius. From the terraced city of first landing a hasty journey northward, and so we find our boys in Venice, roused by falling bombs from its dream of peace on a bed of islands.

The young aviators were on the way and drawing nigh to the fighting ground of Trent and Trieste, deep dents of contention in that great semi-circle of the Alps, sweeping from the French frontier on the Mediterranean to the Austrian frontier on the Adriatic.

"Some shakeup here, Buddy," was Billy's comment as his chum and himself trod closely at the heels of Colonel Nicolini when entering the shattered interior of the historic church, where could be seen twisted beams and arches, panels and columns of alabaster crushed into bits and lying around in heaps.

The characteristic remark of the Bangor boy was lost upon Henri, who had ever an eye for the beautiful, and always sadly impressed by these marring effects of war. The Trouville lad was looking at the wonderful frescoes dumped in huge masses of debris on the stone pavement. "What a pity," he murmured.

Luigi, one of the two noted Italian aviators in the party, and at the elbow of Henri when the latter lowly expressed his regret that such treasures were lost, muttered in a different tone some blasting comment on the heads of those responsible for the deed of destruction. "For a minute's meeting, I would give much," said the flyer, with a flash of the eye that carried a volume of meaning.

"Many times the chance is coming," quietly as-

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sured Moroni, the other war eagle, showing a glittering row of teeth in smile of anticipation.

Billy and Henri had seen some mountain fighting in the Carpathians and fully realized the come-together opportunities of furious conflict in the deep passes, on the ridges and the rocky slopes. And Billy had later to assert: "You don't hear so much abroad about the Alps end of the big scrap, but, believe me, it's a scorcher all the same!"

It was near to the noon hour when Colonel Nicolini and the four aviators left the ruins of the famous pile and faced the Grand Canal, crowded with gondolas. Their route was to the big railway station, the junction for many lines for strategic military movements toward the frontier, where the boys were to become active factors in a new service and in territory wholly strange to them.

They had brought from London the conferred label of "air drivers extraordinary," and, as Billy laughingly put it, "loan exhibit A from the British Admiralty." To fly with the war eagles of the Alps was a test of any aviator's metal, as will be developed in this record.

The young airmen breathed again the powder-laden atmosphere on the Isonzo River, along the hotly contested way toward the main point of attack, the Austrian town of Gorizia, and under the frowning muzzles of the empire's batteries trained down from mountain tops.

"Did you ever see such climbers?" Billy was pointing out to his chum the strenuous and successful effort of artillerists in hauling a big gun up a grade that seemed at first glance impassable. The upshooting road over which the monster field-piece was traveling had been constructed of timbers laid crosswise after the style of railway sleepers, and arranged on these timbers was parallel planking, properly spaced to take the mortar wheels. A hundred soldiers tugged and strained to make the grade—and they made it, for it was not long until the cannon, in position, was sending hot shot at the enemy's lofty entrenchments.

"Climbers, man," cried Henri, who had diverted his glance to another quarter, where Italian alpinists were scaling the mountain, pulled up by ropes, while the foe sniped at the men holding and the man coming up. "Look at that!" A stirring exhibit, indeed, of might and skill.

But it was not for long that Our Young Aeroplane Scouts were to figure in the rôle of mere spectators. They had some work in their own particular line cut out for them, when they were expected to make showing as to why they were there.

It was during the third day of the boys at the front, and at a period of intense action by both artillery and infantry forces, when they had a summons to sit as pilots for Luigi and Moroni in a pair of army aeroplanes of high power, and equipped

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with wireless apparatus by none other than the noted inventor, Marconi, whom Billy and Henri had seen going about in the uniform of a lieutenant of engineers.

"You'll have something extra on me," observed the Bangor boy to his chum, when he noted the telegraph attachment to the machines, "for you've always been the handy fellow with such contraptions."

"No show for me to work the 'waves' on this trip, though," remarked Henri, accepting his flying partner's tribute with a mock bow. "I'll be just a plain wheelman like yourself."

Nobody worked the wireless, it turned out, during the flight upon which the aerialists were about to embark. The ride started between two brands of bad weather, snow falling in the higher zone and rain in the lower, and ended in a night tempest.

The aeroplanes guided by the boys, constantly advised as to direction by the observers, Luigi and Moroni, served as convoy for an Italian dirigible, weighted with explosives with which to bombard enemy encampments on the plain of Gorizia.

Billy and Henri, absolutely without knowledge of the lay of the land, and steering by compass in course marked by shouted commands from the rear, had no other thought and responsibility at the time than to ease through the variable air currents and keep the dirigible in sight.

The veterans in the lookout seats, however, had each a choice collection of bombs to think about, and the grim anticipation of planting them where they would do the most harm. Luigi had still a sore spot in recollection of the ruined church in Venice.

Holding to the slower progress of the "gas bag," as Billy persisted in calling the dirigible, the aeroplanes achieved nothing like even their normal speed, and growing storm conditions and approaching night formed a combination that under ordinary circumstances would have induced an aircraft hunt for a soft and safe place to land.

But "ordinary circumstances" were hardly known in the war game, and as there issued no order for descent, the young pilots did not count it up to themselves to make it their first time of showing the white feather in any sort of situation aloft. As yet, and anyhow the danger threatening was not a marker to several experiences the boys had had when suspended in darkness between earth and sky, with the elements raging and, at times, the added menace of shot and shell.

If there was this night to be a repetition of such former nerve tests, it was still ahead, and the pilots unconscious of just how soon they would dash into it.

With the cross-winds of mountain and plain, the dirigible wobbled and strained from end to end of its

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envelope, and the aeroplanes had shivers in their rigging, but the craft plunged onward to the wide range above the level fixed as their goal.

Suddenly a light rocket shot up from the plain, a blazing streak that was dimmed only in the cloud rift under which the war birds were moving like stormy petrels of the mighty deep. Another and still another, so fast they followed, of the hissing, lurid slashes in the black perspective.

Then the searchlights opened the broader and steadier lines of detecting illumination in the sable canopy, heralding uninterrupted shell fire from below, to which both the dirigible and aeroplane operators responded with a continuous shower of bombs that worked woe to the encampments underneath.

The aircraft had lifted beyond the range of the gunfire, but from the full force of the tempest, now at its height, they could not escape, nor do more than scud before the blast. The aeroplanes, with all power on in effort to outride the gale, soon attained such tremendous speed that every raindrop sharply stung the faces of the airmen aboard. Of the dirigible there was no voice in the tempestuous night to tell whither it had drifted.

But in Billy's ear stentorian tones were pouring from the close-pressed lips of Luigi, urging upshoot above the cloud-rift. The veteran realized that the raindrops were now beating down as hail, the chill

in the disturbed atmosphere was more and more apparent, and he well knew that the aeroplanes were nearing the mountain crests, with a smashup imminent if there was not an immediate lift from the level they were pursuing.

Luckily, the machine had then cleared the storm center, and the withdrawal of the wind pressure enabled both pilots, Henri evidently acting upon the same kind of emergency advice as that given his chum, to quickly maneuver for change of course to higher strata.

With the attainment of desired elevation, the aviators, in less aggressive air currents, were enabled to keep the forelights of the machines in steady focus, and guide by the compass with some degree of accuracy. Luigi, with the aid of a night-piercing binocle and his intimate knowledge of the military positions in the region, megaphoned to Billy that the constant flashes then appearing in torn, black clouds lying low to the left were the result of gunfire from the Italian batteries beyond the Isonzo, and the myriad jets of flame showing to the upglance at the right came from Austrian rifles and machine guns on the slopes. The planes were in no peril now of smashing against the side of a mountain, but they surely were running into the scene of spectacular night fighting.

Orders to attempt landing somewhere in the flats beyond the river had been passed by Luigi and

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Moroni to the young pilots, and such was the lurid illumination furnished by the action of the Italian batteries, that it was a possible undertaking to locate at the rear of the roaring mortars and ship-guns a level upon which to alight without wrecking the aircraft. The observers, however, as the aeroplanes circled lower and lower were taking the precaution of using rocket signals to prevent mistake on the part of any of the riflemen in encampment behind the blazing battery point.

Once more on the ground, Billy and Henri could turn individual attention to the vivid effects of the tremendous gunplay at the rock-bound trenches on the mountain side, which gave the heights, even though shrouded by the curtain of night, the appearance of volcanoes, and this fearful and wonderful display held the boys spellbound, for the time being unconscious that they were exposed to the comeback shower of lead.

The arousing command of Luigi to lend a hand in rolling the aeroplanes out of range of damage brought the young aviators to the live sense that in every joint they carried reminder of the strain and stress of prolonged flight in decidedly bad weather conditions.

"Me for a blaze that doesn't come out of a gun," declared Billy, suppressing a running shiver from forehead to foot, when the planes had been safely disposed of under canvas cover.

Blankets and a warm spot were provided for the boys, but slumber was not soon coming—for anywhere in hearing of the Doberdo plateau—called the war home of Old Nick—sleeping is a lost art.

CHAPTER II.

PURSUED BY AUSTRIAN AIRCRAFT.

ANOTHER battle was raging on the heights of Gorizia soon after daybreak, and the distant thundering of the big guns aloft sounded to the young birdmen, throwing off their blankets after several hours of unrest and vain effort to catch more than a few minutes of cat-napping, like clouds colliding in advance of a mountain storm, but the only shadows to be seen from the river flats were smoke wreaths whirling above the misty mountain tops.

The ear-splitting and earth-shaking fusillade in the immediate vicinity of the night landing of the aeroplanes had ceased, as well the rattle and bang of the Austro-Hungarian rifles and machine guns on the facing slopes. Billy and Henri gratefully accepted the chance and the invitation of Luigi and Moroni to get in line for food service, which made up in large degree for the loss of sleep they had endured.

It was a cheerful ascent, then, on the part of the boys when the veteran observers an hour later announced that air scouting was again in order, and Billy spoke his mind in saying, "I guess we can make the rifle without a tumble."

Lifting from the battlefield of the night, the aviators had a magnificent view extending for many miles, the blue Adriatic shimmering in the sunshine to the south, the mountains in front, sidewise view of the great sweep of lowland, and the winding river directly underneath.

The aeroplanes, however, were not holding close to the underside scenery, for with continuous forward movement the trend was upward, and with guiding intent to pass high over the nearest plateau, rising as a level nearly a thousand feet above the Isonzo valley, with numerous peaks of even greater altitude.

Looking down on the mountain knob where the terrific conflict of the day was being waged at terrible cost, to the young pilots it appeared as though the ground in front of the Austrian and Hungarian trenches was literally heaped with Italian dead, and into these trenches, cut and drilled and blasted through the rock, shells in counter-fire were falling like hail, rending, tearing and scattering fragments of corpses in all direction.

It was a fearful and appalling sight, and of the desperate character of the fighting, in close quarters, the boys had never seen the like. They longed for command from the observers to elevate the levers for another thousand-foot rise or, better, directions to make a clean getaway, but the veterans urged the maintenance of the hen-hawk movement, 'round

and 'round over plateau and plain, to which latter level, far below, they were sending wireless messages.

It was an hour or two before the relieving order came by signal from afar, and the flyers set wing westward, following the mountain line; but traveling out of reach of the Austrian batteries, posted at every crest of the encircling heights.

A sweeping turn toward the valley and rapid descent brought the aviators again behind the Italian lines in the lowlands, where some degree of quiet for the time prevailed. The boys were hardly through stretching their legs, cramped by long sitting, in a series of running jumps, when an orderly advised them that their presence was requested by Colonel Nicolini.

The summons was conveyed in the Italian language, instantly understood by Henri—not by Billy, however, except the hand motion of the smiling soldier. The Bangor boy had acquired, by hard knocks, a speaking acquaintance with French and German, along with a smattering of Russian, but he had yet to wrestle with the liquid Venetian as necessity compelled. "What's the use of having a talk-master for a chum," he laughingly declared, when Henri told him what was wanted, "if you can't use him in a pinch?"

Colonel Nicolini, though, had most of his say in plain English, and Billy was not then in need of

an interpreter. "When you have had your geography lesson, signors," proceeded the officer, "the grand opportunity will be given you to win some honors in your own right. My chief aviators tell me that you have nothing yet to learn about managing aircraft, and when they get our war map and you on familiar terms, I am sure you will handsomely support the recommendations that came along with you."

The boys uneasily shuffled their feet at this broadside of compliment, for, becoming suddenly tongue-tied, the foot movement was about the only relief from temporary embarrassment.

"We'll do our level best, sir," were about all the words that Henri could finally assemble in his usually acute mind. Billy got through with a military salute.

Both lads, however, later recovered sufficiently to jokingly plead with their friends, Luigi and Moroni, to "quit guying."

The four had their heads together for the balance of the afternoon studying maps, spread on a camp-table in the colonel's tent, and, to complete their Italian field education, Billy and Henri were advised that another journey or two with the veterans would be necessary to get "landmarks" fixed in their memory. "Then you can go it alone," added Moroni.

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"But what's to be our particular job?" questioned the Bangor boy. "We're not bomb throwers."

"Dispatch, signal and rapid scouting work, I guess," put in Luigi; "and do not worry, signors, you will have few idle moments." The speaker flashed a significant wink at his flying partner.

It was evidently intended that the boys were to have much to do in flying ventures along and over the sea, and, for every training journey following vast stretches of Alpine gorges and peaks, the viewing from aloft of vital war points on mountain and plain, there was double measure of time given to the Adriatic, the Italian side of which is flat and low, without fortifications, while along the east or Austrian side are scattered thousands of islands, making a labyrinth of shallow channels, with coast mountains and forts looming in the rear. A hundred warships, including four dreadnaughts, carried the Italian colors on this great arm of the Mediterranean, and for grips with this fleet about an equal number of Austrian vessels were arrayed within the shelter of heavy coast fortifications.

With their graduation as aerial pathfinders in Italian service, Our Young Aeroplane Scouts reveled again in the satisfaction of working together, and were identified with the main drive, in the eastern section, toward Trieste, the great Austrian port of the Adriatic lying just across from Venice, when they had their first independent adventure.

In a machine especially equipped for long flights, twice by night travel had Billy and Henri seen the lights of Trieste from lofty outlook above the stretch of level country between the Italian frontier and the empire city, protected at the rear by big guns posted on the summit circle of the Carso Mountains.

After sizing up the situation it was the Bangor boy's opinion, privately expressed to his chum, that "the town would make a fine capture but a hot potato to hold."

The young aviators, it came about, found their warm reception in front of Trieste, not back of it. Sailing out and away from the Italian frontier one morning, and emboldened by the success of their night flights, the boys suddenly realized that their craft had been "spotted" from some mountain lookout. Henri's yell of warning had hardly left his throat before Billy's keen eyes also took in the situation. A dozen at least of Austrian aeroplanes, showing the red and white colors, had bounced like magic into the air, and, from right and left, were speeding toward the invading biplane.

"Hoist for your life, Buddy!" The Trouville lad's shrill outcry found instant response in the live-wire action of his pal at the wheel, for the latter put a spur to the war bird that started it skyward like an arrow. A flash and dull report from the gun-end of one of the oncoming aeroplanes indicated the intent of the pursuing aviators to end the chase

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as quickly as possible by effectually putting the aerial visitors out of business.

Billy had it in mind to strike straightaway for friendly soil, but his move had been anticipated by an Austrian pilot, who sent the armored plane he was driving directly across the line of retreat. It was then climb or quit with our boys—and as a climber the Italian craft reflected great credit on its builder. At 8,000 feet the young pilot saw an opening to the north, which for the moment was clear of lead-spitting adversaries, and he started the winged racer through that air lane like an express train making up time on downgrade. With a quarter-mile lead, Billy and Henri had the best of it with one vital exception—they were not going in the right direction for safe landing.

To change course would be to court annihilation, for the aerial opponents were closing in on both sides, and though it was a snow-covered mountain side towards which the young aviators were directly headed, no other way than to continue was offered for choice.

Just how far they had traveled since the hostile aeroplanes had first driven them to getaway flight, the boys had no guess, so intent were they upon the one idea of escaping, but with a speed of about a mile a minute, and continuous for three quarters of an hour, the Trieste plain was a long distance back and the heights ahead had no semblance to any

range with which Billy and Henri had become familiar in their recent training experience.

Both of the lads had reached about the same conclusion as the aeroplane neared the rocky slopes, and that was to take the chance of alighting if a level came handy. By this move they would probably lose their liberty by immediate capture, and surely they would pay the penalty of their lives if the Austrian aerial gunners should happen to make one of their shots count while the fleeing machine was still going.

Henri had risen from the observer's seat and, clinging to the rigging, was watching for the likely spot to land without a smashup. He could hear now the humming and whirring of the flying fleet in the rear, and with expectation of any moment bringing a leaden bolt which might mean the finish of Billy and himself.

On the crest of one of the crags about a hundred yards distant and directly under the line of flight, the straining eyes of the Trouville lad spied a saucer-shaped clearing, happily quite shallow, and like a trumpet call the directing word sounded in the ears of the pilot crouching over the guiding wheel. "Down!" The motors were quiet in a brace of seconds, the aeroplane swiftly glided into the rocky depression, rolling down a slight incline and sharply nosing into a snowdrift. The pursuing aviators were now so nearly overhead that the shouting of

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the observers, noting the quick drop of the Italian craft, could be faintly heard by the boys, who had jumped from the fallen plane and were scurrying up the rise of the bowl and toward a broad ledge overhanging a gorge so deep and dark that it seemed bottomless to downlook from the dizzy height.

The point of attraction to the running lads in seeking the ledge as first refuge was a peculiar rock formation at the extreme end of the shelf, a great knob protruding from the uplifting peak, and which promised shelter in the event of any bomb dropping from the war planes circling overhead.

It was soon to be demonstrated, however, that it was not the intention of the hostile flyers to bulk their own curiosity in regard to the prey now apparently delivered to their hands by the use of death-dealing explosives. Already two of the Austrian aeroplanes were essaying the difficult landing on the crag, and both succeeded in successfully imitating Billy's skilful performance.

"It's all up with us now!" panted the Bangor boy, who had closely followed his chum in the sprint to the knob. The four airmen just alighting, no sooner had they reached the ground, made cautious advance, carrying their carbines in the manner of sportsmen expecting the rise of a flock of quail. What they really expected, no doubt, was a shot at themselves from cover, for with every two or three steps there was a stop and a bending of bodies

so a drop to knee could be instantly accomplished at the very first sign of armed resistance.

Billy, in fact, was taking a minute to debate with himself whether, with four of the enemy already down and a dozen more coming, it would be a mark of valor or a bad break of discretion to turn loose with the revolver he had half-drawn from the holster at his side. He looked over his shoulder to see if his chum had the fighting attitude, and made the startling discovery that Henri was not behind him at all.

"Heard him breathing a second or two ago," was the mental assertion of the Bangor boy. Then fearful imagination took form. Had Henri slipped and fallen into the gorge? Cold perspiration started in beads on Billy's forehead. He had no thought of the men in front steadily closing in upon him, other than to view their advance as a threat too vague to consider.

From this trance of despair he was awakened by a birdlike note, a familiarly whistled signal, apparently on the other side of the knob, which at first hasty glance of the hurried run in had presented to Billy no passing point except by thin air over a thousand-foot pit.

Again the softly trilling note, and the Bangor boy, assured that his chum was living and near at hand, faced about, alert and capable of tackling any sort of venture that would hasten a reunion.

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Moving closer to the rock foundation that seemingly formed a solid barrier at the extremity of the ledge, Billy glimpsed just about a toe-hold space between the knob and the sheer descending wall of the gorge.

As he could not follow the thin line of footing like a ropewalker, all the balance on one side, the young aviator sidestepped it, palming with his uplifted hands the outer rim of the knob, and going on tiptoe below.

None too soon the perilous passage. The Austrians had rushed the position just vacated by the Bangor boy!

CHAPTER III.

IN THE PATH OF AN AVALANCHE.

AT the last curve of the knob Billy had the ticklish problem to solve of shifting one foot with only three or four inches of foundation under the other, and nothing but smooth surface for a hand-rest. Henri, however, was in time with an extended arm, and the Bangor boy made the round, though a single slip would have spelled disaster.

"Geeminy, pard, how did you ever make it yourself?" This was Billy's almost breathless question when he backed with Henri against a big boulder obstructing the pathway, which was a narrow continuation of the ledge on the other side of the knob.

"Thought you were coming all the time," hastily explained the Trouville lad, "but when I didn't hear you scratching along the rock face I was almost scared out of my boots."

"Scared, old top!" exclaimed Billy. "I had just about quit being a man when I heard you whistle. Believed you were a sure goner."

"Maybe I was, pretty near," admitted Henri. "It took a lively leg to make that turn. But it was the only way."

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The baffled aviators on the opposite side of the barrier were indulging in a volume of loud talking and an occasional oath. The boys could plainly hear some of the higher pitched tones, and one very positive command operated like a galvanic battery in starting the young fugitives, with scant regard for safe travel, on a skip over the rocks with which the pathway along the precipice was plentifully bestrewn.

The pursuers were going to resume the chase from the topside, and with the aeroplanes hovering over the gorge, Billy and Henri quickly realized that in their present exposed position they would be easy marks for the flying gunners.

All went well for about fifty yards, when the boys ran into another cut-off, the base of a crag that towered, straight up, a hundred feet or more. There was no inducement to tackle this climb, nor yet to even consider an impossible descent into the gorge, so it looked like a standstill job for the moment, or until Henri saw a break in the mountain side steeply rising just behind them, and between the knob and the crag. A hardy growth of bushes extended quite a distance up the wall, and if these could be reached before the hostile aeroplanes got around, there was another fighting chance of concealment in the crevice sighted by the Trouville lad.

"Let's go to it, pal," he urged, pointing out to Billy the way of ascent. "It'll be a tough scramble

at first, but I think we can make it. It's worth a trial, anyhow."

Suiting action to words, Henri sprang at the task, and though at the beginning he lost about as much ground as he gained, perseverance won him a hold in the first bush clump. Billy got his grip on a root a minute later, and though he complained of damage to his fingernails, there was no halt to appraise the loss, for already in hearing was the familiar hum of aeroplane motors, and the boys had every muscle in play to make the crevice goal before they could be seen by the aerial hunting party.

Just at the time when the climbers reached the mouth of the fissure in the mountain side, a cannon was fired from the gun-end of one of the army aeroplanes, a leader of the fleet sweeping in above the gorge. The round shot struck at a point considerably higher than the place where the boys had gone into hiding, and probably intended as a "feeler." But though no particular target had been under aim, nevertheless the explosion and the leaden impact started something that was not uncommon in these parts—an avalanche of snow, of the kind that many a time and oft had stopped military operations in the Alps.

Our Young Aeroplane Scouts, however, were still too new in the country to have experienced the danger of getting in the path of one of these Alpine downsweeps, with all its sudden, irresistible and

overwhelming force. Hardly had the echoes of the gun explosion died away in the air-spaces of the gorge when they were succeeded aloft by a very bedlam of sound, grinding, crushing, roaring--and more and more terrifying as the great masses of snow and ice, rocks and earth gained momentum and neared the crevice into which the boys had crawled.

"The mountain's falling down!" Billy made the prediction with a screech, on hands and knees and instinctively backed away from the crevice opening, yelling to Henri to "get a move on him," setting live example by rolling down the incline to the rear and into the furthestmost interior of the fissure. The Trouville lad came rolling after, and had just bumped against his chum in the inner rock chamber when the avalanche thundered by in front, sealing up with a ton of debris the aperture by which the boys had entered like the door of a mummy's last home.

In total darkness the lads huddled together, too bewildered by the tremendous shakeup of the passing moment to comprehend just what had happened to them.

It was Henri who first faintly remarked, and with a tremble in his voice: "We're buried alive, pal, and no show to see the light again."

His chum's gloomy prediction failed to have a depressing effect upon Billy, although there was not

much in the situation to encourage a happier view. The Bangor boy, in fact, had just come to the determination that it was his turn to do some relief work in the present pinch, and he was already in action. Though the crevice apparently was completely blocked in front, there was freedom and to spare for burrowing inside, and if the air was a little close at this end of the fissure, Billy figured that there might be better breathing space somewhere further along. He followed the theory as fast as his elbows and knees would work, and in a minute or two sent back a joyful summons to Henri that he had found standing room. Showing the way by the light of a match, Billy led his flying partner, now on foot, a distance of some twenty steps, when they felt a current of fresh air blowing in their faces. Another match revealed a broader path for progress, and the sheltering rocks overhead could no longer be reached by arm elevation.

As the lucifer flickered out, and before Billy could scratch for another tiny flame, he stood for a sudden shock that made him gasp and backtread on his comrade's toes. He felt two soft thumps against his breast, and a cold and clammy touch on his cheek, while his wildly outstretched hands came in contact with a hairy shape, upstanding and panting in his face. Paralyzed in his tracks by the startling onset, the Bangor boy could do nothing but gasp against the scare lump in his throat.

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Henri came to the rescue with a quick-snapping taper, and lo and behold, the animal which had put Billy out of courage was a dog of the magnificent Newfoundland breed, whose mission is to save, not harm.

A piercing whistle sounded somewhere ahead, and the canine greeting ceased as quickly as it began, the dog bounding away in the darkness, giving his version of good-bye with a "woof." The boys accepted the Newfoundland as a friend, and, hoping to find the master as good as his messenger, hastened on the trail of the latter, making reckless use of matches to hold the direction. Very soon there was no need at all for artificial illumination, for a sharp turn in the pathway opened up quite a glimpse of daylight, and through blinking eyes Billy and Henri also caught sight, at the edge of the plateau, of about as picturesque a figure as they had ever seen in their travels.

Under a cone-shaped hat, nearly six-and-a-half feet of splendid manhood, attired in sheepskin jacket, silver frogged; velveteen trousers to the knee, joining there with leather leggings; wound about with scarlet sash, rifle strapped across his broad shoulders and alpenstock in hand.

"Looks like he fell out of a picture book," this note of admiration from Billy, and in close communication with his chum.

The dog, seeming eager to serve as introducer,

clumsily capered up and down the mountain path between his master and the advancing lads, and succeeded in attracting the attention of the former to the newly discovered friends coming up the slope.

At first view of the young aviators the giant reached within the folds of the encircling sash, as if seeking a weapon which he knew would be of effective service in quick action, but when Billy, more than half assured that by garb at least it was not an Austrian soldier he was approaching, had the thought to wave the pilot flag he had put in his pocket after the aeroplane had fallen, the warlike attitude of the big fellow relaxed again into the pose of superb indifference.

Getting foot on the plateau, Henri gave the mountaineer greeting in Italian, and in return received a curious glance from the man addressed, instantly succeeded by a smile that took all the harsh lines out of the stranger's sharply molded features. "Nero tried to tell me of other life nearby," he said in the liquid dialect of the peninsula, "but on this summit he more often has word of the chamois or the red fox than of the two-legged kind. How came you here?" The question had an abruptness that did not balance with the rather quaint beginning relative to Nero's methods as an informer.

"First in an aeroplane," was Henri's direct response, "but if you mean how we reached this

particular spot, I am not quite sure myself just how we did do it."

The mountaineer did not smile at this answer; he evidently did not catch the humor in the last part of it.

Billy, at a loss to know exactly the meaning of the conversation, gave his chum a poke in the side. "Ask him, Buddy, for a change, just what section we're in at this precious moment."

The Trouville lad let go a running fire of Italian in the direction of the new acquaintance, and all that he received in return he as rapidly translated for Billy's benefit.

"He says he is Antonio Vespia, or something like that; he is not a brigand or a smuggler, but a free lance of the high places; we are in the spurs of the Trentino Alps, called the Tyrolean country; not the real Tyrol, for most of the people hereabouts, though Austrians in name, are Italians in both language and heart. Antonio has two brothers who have gone south to fight for Italy. He's going himself soon, and will show us the way."

"Bully for that last!" ejaculated the Bangor boy. "Sound him some more."

"It's the knapsack that's going to be 'sounded' next," observed Henri, noting the action of Antonio in unhooking the food receptacle from the strap under his arm. Though the bread was of the dark baking, and trying to the teeth, though the cheese

was overly strong, and too much salt in the cold meat strips, the lads were hungry enough to enjoy every mouthful as much as did Nero.

The meal finished, Antonio was evidently bent on continuing his journey, whatever and wherever the destination. Billy and Henri were mighty glad to be taken in tow by so capable a guide, and inwardly wondered where they would have wandered had it not been for this lucky strike.

They had need to do something else than wonder before the party had progressed very far. That was, to mind their steps, for Antonio's way was a difficult one to travel, and many times in the hour ran close to the brink of nowhere, twisting, ice-bound paths in a maze of peaks, passes and precipices. Antonio, sure-footed as a chamois, moved with confidence and dispatch, and at length, in order that some of the more perilous passages could be made with greater safety by his young companions, he used the rope connection, which is the usual precaution of guides in similar adventure. Nero was the only one not included in the "tie."

The climbers rested at nightfall in a cavern some 8,000 feet above sea level, and of which Antonio had knowledge through several previous ventures along the same line of dangerous ascent. The cold outside was intense, but within the rugged walls of the cavern the mountaineer contrived to make the

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sojourn fairly comfortable with a fire of pine and fir twigs and dried moss.

Insisting that the boys should share his blanket roll, the guide and the young aviators added to warmth as close bedfellows, and sound sleepers were they, with the faithful Nero on guard.

The morning brought a sudden awakening to Billy and Henri. Sounds akin to the incessant pounding of a great drum beset their ears, and the lads were up and listening in a jiffy. Antonio's tall form was framed in the arch of the cavern entrance, where, shading his eyes with his hands, he apparently sought, in the sun-illuminated and glittering landscape, the source of the disturbance.

"Maybe it's another avalanche," suggested Billy, who had been shaken out of a busy dream about one of the same tumbling terrors.

The Trouville lad immediately put the question to their guide. The latter, without turning his head, gave prompt assurance that it was something else than a mountain slide which was making the noise. "Guns, big ones," as he briefed it.

"Ah hah! I see it!" cried the Bangor boy, excitedly gesturing towards the northwest, where smoke was spreading like a pall over the white picture.

"At the great fort they are fighting," proclaimed the mountaineer, when he noted the location of the

smoke clouds. "It is not so far; by crossing the ridge we can see it all. Make haste, signors!"

As the boys had nothing to do but put best foot forward, Antonio had no occasion to repeat his hurry-up request, and the passage of the ridge was in the making in less than five minutes, but not in easy making, it may be stated, for it was, indeed, a task of strenuous endeavor. More than once the rope that held the lads in the guide's train was stretched to hard fiber by the slips of the young trailers.

Once over the slippery crest, Antonio soon struck into a well-defined path, curving around the base of a beetling crag, and his prediction about seeing "it all" was impressively verified at the very next turn.

For miles and miles the vista ranged, clear as crystal, to the vision. Far to the right of the eerie outlook point, and seemingly magnified in bold relief, was a mountain fortress, cutting into the Alpine sky at an acute angle—a great stone building topped with steel cupolas, out of which heavy guns were at the time blazing and booming.

"The devil take them," muttered the mountaineer, leaning on his alpenstock, and, eagle-eyed, concentrating fierce gaze upon the resisting enclosure, seemingly impregnable amid the clouds of Austria.

Then the counter reverberation—the attacking Italian armament, big guns that had been lifted up sheer walls by the heavy artillery units, hundreds

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of men with ropes and derricks, and now within the range to pulverize with steel the great mountain stronghold.

"The twelve-inch shells—hear them sing!"
exulted Antonio.

CHAPTER IV.

RAPID JOURNEY ON SKIS.

SHAKEN as if by an earthquake, the chain of massive stone ramparts, climbing hundreds of feet up the incline, were going down in dust heaps, so terrific the fire from the modern Italian guns, which even then were reaching still higher, wrecking on the very summit the crown of the fortress pyramid, that other great gray building, bristling with cannon of heavy caliber, now for the last time dominating the valley.

Antonio, with every telling stroke of destruction and every renewed indication of victorious outcome of the bombardment projected by his countrymen, kept himself in a fever of enthusiasm by exclamations of triumph and ceaseless striding up and down the rocky platform. It was not until the day had begun to wane that he favored the boys with some degree of remembrance, and, also, indulged the thought that this crag offered little protection against the rigors of an Alpine night.

Notwithstanding the enfoldment of their fleeced-lined jackets, Billy and Henri were chilled as before they had been thrilled at the lurid battle scene.

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"Say, boss, isn't it about time to get under cover?" This question and suggestion had been close to speaking point with the Bangor boy since the first approach of evening, but not until the guide showed signs of recovery from fighting mania did he put them in words. Though only half understanding, Antonio, as before stated, was ready to move on his own volition, though with many a back-look of lingering regret in the direction of the shell-storm, which still raged, despite the growing darkness.

"We will walk over those walls within two suns," he confidently asserted, as the trio picked their way in downward course on the nearest slope. The lads were inwardly gratified that there was to be no recrossing of the ridge, for their muscles still ached from the exertion of the first trip on that treacherous crest.

"It's about a sure shot that the big fellow will find shelter when we need it most," said Billy to his chum, while they plodded at the heels of the mountaineer. Talking trigger English, the Bangor boy was not compelled to speak guardedly in the presence of the guide.

As the descent progressed, the extreme cold of the higher altitude moderated in a marked degree, and the boys also appreciated that breathing was easier to accomplish. Antonio every now and then paused to give vent to a peculiar cry, long-drawn and

musical, that carried far in dusk, but somehow failed to bring back a responsive chord.

"He's singing a signal," commented Billy, which comment conveyed nothing new to Henri, who was already well aware of the purpose of the guide's vocal performance.

Nero proved to be the leader in the movement that finally led to fire, food and rest. The turbulent wash of a brawling mountain stream was in hearing, and the weary travelers were just observing the shadowy outlines of an extensive timbered area when the dog suddenly deserted the rest of the party, and disappeared in the dim recesses beneath the gaunt pines.

Antonio made no effort to recall the recreant animal, but deliberately turned and followed the canine trail, which the master, by experience, counted as true as the hands of a compass.

Passing the first thin line of trees, the guide and his companions stumbled into a wall of solid rock, along which, Antonio, now apparently sure of himself, immediately proceeded to feel his way. Billy turned on the glimmer of a match as a material aid in a blind venture, and the trio found themselves in smooth footing on a broad walk winding upwards towards some bulky shadow, that showed now a single shining eye.

"We've arrived, Buddy, but I don't know where."

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As Henri was no better informed about the situation, he made no reply to his chum's whisper.

There was, however, no long wait for light on the mystery, nor on the broad walk, either, for the shining eye was many times multiplied when the mountaineer once more raised from his throat that singular call of the heights which the boy had first heard a short time previously, and a wide-open door revealed several moving figures between the line of night and a blazing fire in the interior of a great stone structure.

Antonio quickly advanced at this sign of welcome, hat in hand, and lowly bowed in recognition of the greeting bestowed by an aged man in sandals and coarse gown with rope girdle. Of like garb were the others in the arched entrance.

"What of the night, my sons?" softly questioned the venerable monk, and, as though there was no requirement of answer, pointed to the benches before the fire, in mute invitation to the travelers to avail themselves of the assured warmth.

Before Antonio could draw near to the glowing center of the chimney-base, he was compelled to laughingly resist an onslaught from a big bundle of hair that catapulted at him like a thousand of bricks. It was Nero, the guide with a keen nose for a pot-roast in the culinary end of the ancient monastery.

"It has not been my fine fortune, Father, to look in upon you for many a day," observed the moun-

taineer, stretching his long legs to the cheerful blaze, "and must needs the dog yonder teach me the short route this night."

"He has a memory, mayhap, for the cookery of the good brother Ramon," said the Franciscan, with a twinkle in his kindly eye.

"No more than have I, Father," heartily declared Antonio, with an expectant air.

"What's the decision of the court?" queried Billy, speaking in the ear of his chum.

"Eats," was Henri's short but satisfying reply.

To the boys no damask or silver ever held food which tasted better than that produced from the smoking pot and bountifully served on the long table in the candle-lit refectory of this ancient pile.

And there was a blanket and a shelf for each of the tired wayfarers when they sought sleep.

"From the mountain wilds come many who owe much to this refuge," gravely advised Antonio at the retiring hour.

In the morning the boys had their first cause to complain of the program of entertainment—no one was expected to be tardy in getting up, and to Billy and Henri, after strenuous adventure, it seemed an unearthly hour when Antonio urged them to rise.

It had been heavily snowing during the night, and a look through the embrasures caught the impression that a newly laundered sheet had been dropped haphazard on the lap of the earth.

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"Some wading out there, if we make a go of it this day," observed the Bangor boy, on the way to breakfast.

He had later to recall a former lesson, that mountain snow is not always as soft as it appears on the surface.

It developed that Antonio's plan of descent to the valley involved the use of skis, in the absence of aeroplanes, as the most approved way of getting over the ice and deep snow in the least period of time. The monks had provided the necessary equipment for such a journey, and Billy and Henri were booked for a brand-new experience, though both of them had an earlier record of cutting didoes with steel-runner skates on many frozen rivers and ponds in Uncle Samdom.

"If anything happens to me, pard," said the Bangor boy, as he cast a dubious look at the "sliders" upon which his chum and himself were expected to perform, "let the world know that the end was not unexpected."

What the boys had bound to their feet were strips of hard wood five feet long and four or five inches wide, pointed and curved upwards in front, the same pattern used by the ski detachments of the Italian forces operating in the mountains. Antonio, who was a pastmaster in the gliding art, put his young friends through some of the paces before they started on the through run, and lost a lot of his

native dignity by boisterous exhibit of mirth at their awkward antics in the initial stage of training. But Billy and Henri, never slow about learning, soon got "the hang of the thing," as the Maine lad put it, and though they had their hearts in their mouths when whizzing down the first long incline, they managed to keep their feet in proper alignment—that is, most of the time. Up or down, over or across, the amateur mountaineers realized that the skis were just the full need on an occasion like this. And while they marveled at the skimming ease and grace of Antonio, they also grew in the belief that they were, themselves, giving a pretty fair imitation for beginners.

During a slower period of locomotion, on an extensive level, Henri succeeded in finding out from the guide that the determined purpose of the latter was to get in touch as quickly as possible with the forces engaged in pulverizing the Austrian stronghold, and which process had not been quite completed, judging from the occasional gun-thunder in the distance.

"It looked nearer than it really was," asserted Billy, who for a half-hour past had been confidently expecting a run in on the scene of hostilities, which they had viewed from lofty perch the day before.

A dozen times counted was that half-hour before the trio had the then concluding battle of the clouds again under observation, and now about all they

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could see on the sites of forts or ramparts were the imprints, in a veritable landslide, of hundreds of shell craters.

"A clean sweep, sir," said Henri, addressing the mountaineer, who, wordless, was contemplating the ruins.

"It is finished," was the brief comment of Antonio, but conveying a volume of emphatic approval.

In the late afternoon the three travelers and their shaggy escort, Nero, walked within the lines of the fighting contingent that by superhuman feats had challenged the impossible, and reversed its meaning.

It was not until the next day that Henri had the opportunity of reporting to an officer that his chum and himself were aviation aids by the grace of Colonel Nicolini, and for the present minus an aeroplane, frankly confessing, however, that they had been compelled to leave a perfectly good one on the mountain top.

"Sometimes it happens," commented the soldier, smiling, "that qualified aviators are more difficult to replace than machines, and the benefit of the doubt on the point is yours."

"We're all to the good, pal," was Henri's assurance to Billy.

"Keep going then while the going is good," advised the Bangor boy. "Put a plane under us, and we'll get back all right."

The following morning the young scouts had "a

plane under them," and part of a flock of aircraft carrying dispatches to army centers east. Before the jump into space Billy and Henri did not forget the caress for Nero, and to the master, heartfelt assurance of grateful appreciation. "But we'll meet again, signors," were Antonio's parting words, "and soon be the day."

Luigi and Moroni hailed the boys as risen from the dead, when the four met in the army quarters of the upper Adriatic, and the veterans said that twice had they ventured far over the Trieste plain in vain search for the missing youths.

"We had then changed our base to another section," stated Henri; "not that we wanted to do so, but it was a clear case of having to."

When the story of adventure had been told, the listeners shook their heads, as much as to say "born lucky," or something like it.

Idle hours had no charm for the young aviators, and it was with a whoop of delight that Henri announced to his pal that their vacation of several days was about to end in an assignment to operate a new seaplane, which had just been sent up from Rome.

"You know," breezed the Trouville lad, "I just mentioned to Luigi, when we first met him, that we had had a good deal to do with hydroplaning in former service, that it was, in fact, our long suit, and here's the result. It pays to advertise, old top."

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The craft proved to be of up-to-date construction and of double-engine capacity, insuring speed and staying power in continuous flight.

"When we get the rough edges polished off," was Billy's inspection comment, "we'll see what she can do."

On the very day that Our Young Aeroplane Scouts went aloft for first try-out of the new seaplane, up and down the coast word was passing of the staggering blow dealt by the Austrians to the little mountain kingdom of Montenegro in the capture of Mt. Lovcen, the "Gibraltar of the Adriatic." From the gunner who accompanied them, one Julius, the boys learned that the sky citadel which had just been successfully stormed by the enemy was supposed by the Montenegrins to be absolutely impregnable, "and if you could see it, signors," continued the informant, "you would think the same. It is a marvel that it should have fallen."

It jointly occurred to the boys that if there were any marvels being perpetrated hereabouts, it was only a chance they wanted to find out for themselves how the job was done. They had vivid memory of the razing of that mighty fortress in the western mountains, which they had witnessed in company with Antonio.

In further advices later, Billy and Henri gathered that when the great guns were silenced which had frowned down on the city of Cattaro, that important

Austrian naval base on the Adriatic, the dual empire had gained in dominance of the sea, and added grave menace to Italy.

Now followed the seizure of Cetinje, the Montenegrin capital, the departure of the court, and for the first time in its long history the little kingdom of the clouds had been compelled to bow to a foreign conqueror.

In the stew of these events was brewing another adventure for our boys, of which they were then unconscious, too busy in flying about in patrol service to give thought of the to-morrow.

And had not both Luigi and Moroni gravely warned the young aviators to ware away from the mountainous coast line, unless there should be imperative demand for the risk?

CHAPTER V.

AN ODD SPOT OF THE WORLD.

"‘THE city where the sun never shines’ and ‘the famous ladder to the clouds.’ Have you got these titles in your notebook, Sir William?" Henri put the question to Billy, while the boys were resting at Brindisi after a long flight from the upper Adriatic. They had traveled as dispatch bearers, without company, and for the time being in sole control of the big seaplane, which they had just put in fine shape for the return trip.

"Is that in the newspaper you’ve been spelling over for the past hour?" The Bangor boy surmised that his chum had read the appellations in the print he was scanning with so much interest. Henri nodded assent.

"Here is something about the territory which, according to Julius, produced a marvel the other day—Cattaro is the ‘dark town’ mentioned, and the ‘ladder’ is what helped to break into the mountain safe."

"Say, pal," proposed Billy, "don’t you think we could take a peek at the wonderland on the way

back? The fight's all over for the present, and I believe we could sail by without risk of a spill."

The Trouville lad, for the once, showed caution. "You know, old chap, we've lost one good machine already in this campaign, and if we get to fooling along the heights on the other side, it may happen again."

Billy, however, had set his mind on this jaunt to forbidden ground, and he was tolerably sure that his flying partner was inwardly if not outwardly partial to the venture. "Now, pard," he argued, "we are going to stay with the craft this time, and if we hit anything, or anything hits us, there'll be no personal worry about what the colonel will say."

"That's a cheerful idea," laughed Henri; "but what's the use of palavering about it? We'll make the dash, and if you're sorry for it don't blame the luck or me."

Guiding out to sea, the young aviators gaily signaled to the ships at anchor and afloat, showing the red, white and green with the centered cross and crown. That they were expecting to sail quite a distance from the colors this day was a plan known only to the boys in the seaplane.

The walled city of Cattaro lies in a vast amphitheatre of mountains, and even in the dim ages was known as "the city where the sun never shines." It is a town that closes its colossal gates at midnight, and any citizen outside after twelve, had no chance

of sleeping at home. The Bay of Cattaro is famed for its wild beauty, but of surpassing interest in the war story is that wonderful feat of Austrian engineering skill—a broad road twisting like a serpent up the steep side of Mt. Lovcen, connecting the ancient city at the foot of the mountain with Cetinje, the now conquered capital of the Montenegrins. This is the Ladder of Cattaro, and its building cost many Austrian lives, laborers who blasted the way from the sheer wall of rock, while suspended by ropes in baskets from the top of the mountain.

At a great height Our Young Aeroplane Scouts in their airship floated over this ground picture, satisfying that ever-present desire with them to see the odd spots of the world, at whatever hazard. Both of them, however, were alert in the use of their eyes in all directions, and ready to break seaward at the first threatening demonstration on the part of any hostile observer of their movements. The tested and known tremendous speed of the war bird they were driving was their main assurance of safe departure, for if not crippled by a chance shot, the modern machine could be counted on for a getaway at the rate of ninety miles an hour.

“The hilltoppers that kicked, as I’ve been told they did, when Austria built that road, had an eye to the future, let me say to you, Buddy. I’ve a reverse photograph in my mind of troops otherwise

going up that wall." Billy eased the steering wheel long enough to pass this opinion back to his chum.

Henri's reply did not in any manner relate to the strategic importance of the Cattaran ladder. He put a snap in his voice when yelling at the pilot to look toward the harbor. Two incoming seaplanes had just splashed into the water, and the Trouville lad was morally certain that they would splash out again at first sight of the invading craft.

Billy needed no second view of the newly arrived war birds. He started the plane for higher strata like a rocket, and then swerved in course among the crags of the Montenegro or Black mountains, which are not black, but bare, cold gray. Against this background, the pilot hoped to escape the notice of any airmen who might elsewhere be aloft in the vicinity. The ruse was successful in the one respect, but the reverse in another. A mountain battery in a cup of one of the crags turned loose a broadside, and it was all off for the airship except a straight bolt for the sea, and an exhibit of its vaunted speed.

With the double engines working like greased lightning, the splendid craft passed over the coast line and out and away across the bounding blue of the Adriatic. As the pilot wheeled to the north, he was advised by his companion that aerial pursuit had been started, but in supreme confidence, Billy, with clear sailing, had no quickening of pulse or extra heart-beat at the word. "If the petrol holds

out," was the only reckoning to disturb, and Henri had made no adverse report as yet regarding the flow from the tanks.

Forty or fifty miles had been reeled off in the arrow-like flight, when the Trouville lad made loud announcement that three warships were in the tide beneath, and showing the red and white, the colors of Austria-Hungary. A spout of flame and a dull boom, with repetition now and again, indicated that the seaplane was not passing unnoticed, though clearly out of reach of any short-range gun.

"Better hunt the clouds, pal," urged Henri; "they may have a reacher on board, and some fellow with a good eye."

"Hunt it is," cried Billy, overshoulder, nosing the machine for a quick lift.

It was a fortunate move, as the next instant brought a shell from an anti-aircraft cannon that only fell a few yards short of even the higher strata through which the seaplane was speeding.

But this danger was receding with every sweep forward of the war bird, and within the next half-hour night closed in over the sea, putting the pilot to the test of guiding wholly by the compass, in which the one light the boys permitted themselves to use in the air vessel was shining. The seaplane had equipment for illumination that would give it the appearance of a burning house on the wing, yet the aviators were chary of showing more than the

necessary glim at the magnetic meridian. They had no desire to bait any of the bomb-casting aerialists who might be out on a raiding tour from the Austrian side.

Billy was beginning to feel the strain of continuous exertion at the wheel, which had been relieved only by several brief floating rests in Italian waters during the voyage out from Brindisi, and when Henri had volunteered for a turn or two as pilot.

Believing now that the Italian coast was the nearest land, the Bangor boy gratefully accepted the suggestion of his chum that they descend for a time, and then there was scarcely more than a slight breeze to force disturbance of the gently undulating waves below.

As the seaplane gracefully settled in the water, with motors stilled, the quiet seemed almost oppressive to the young scouts, who had listened so long to the vibrant revolutions of the driving machinery. Save for the lapping of the waves against the polished sides of the winged boat no other sound was heard, and to the vision there was impenetrable darkness all about.

Henri broke the silence by telling Billy that the petrol supply was now running low, and their next move must needs be to the friendly coast, to replenish the tanks before attempting the longer voyage to the upper Adriatic. "I have an idea,"

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he continued, "that we can make shore in less than an hour now. We'll be seeing the moon before long—the rising was about this time last night—and that will be a big help in getting our bearings with some degree of certainty.

The young pilot, who had been taking it easy and half reclining against the rigging, had a sudden inspiration to sit up and take notice of something besides the talk of his chum. "Be still a minute, Buddy," he requested, in low tone, "there's company 'round here, or my ears have gone wrong. Listen!"

Off to the right a churning of the water was distinctly audible, and attendant sounds which were not strange in the experience of the boy scouts. "A submarine!" Henri's whisper was convincing. Both of the lads felt sure that an undersea craft had just come to the surface. Friend or foe? The question was vital. To start the seaplane engine for a getaway would be the very noise to draw a flashlight and, perhaps, a destroying torpedo before the flying machine could leave the water. Of added peril, too, the big war bird in starting flight would make a target that the submarine gun could hardly miss. Upon a toss-up of fortune and the promised moon the issue would depend.

Billy set grip on the wheel and Henri crouched in the motor end of the floating plane, each intent but uncertain of purpose, awaiting the best chance

to turn the balance. That the submarine had not again submerged was conveyed by voices in the night, and equal proof that it was not far distant came with the flare of an electric torch above the conning tower hatch of the undersea craft.

"Shall I start her?" The Trouville lad leaned far forward to whisper the query.

The pilot half turned, with a word trembling on his lips, which failed of utterance when a shout from the deck of the submarine anticipated the unspoken assent to Henri's eager proposing question. A broad shaft of silvery radiance suddenly outlined itself on the face of the wide waste of water, enveloping in its effulgence the rocking seaplane and its unwelcome neighbor, the underwater boat. The young aviators, on first impression, imagined that a searchlight had been turned upon them, and this succeeding what they had presumed was a loudly voiced note of discovery, cast hope of escape into the dumps.

Momentarily expecting preemptory hail from the bridge of the fighting machine, the boys had just about resolved to relieve the suspense by risking all in one wild venture of speeding through the waves and then aloft.

Strangely, but yet a fact, the rising moon was not to prove of aid in an easy capture by the submarine, and so quickly apparent this turn of affairs that the

seaplane drivers held off from taking the final desperate chance.

"I really believe, pard, that the whaleback over there is getting ready to duck." Billy's advance opinion was hardly out of his mouth when the hull he was intently watching in the moonlight all at once disappeared, leaving in its wake an evanescent chain of foam and bubbles.

In the upper reaches were developed the reasons for the submarine's sudden dive. A fleet of war planes, in circular maneuver—a half dozen of them—hovered directly over the aqueous spot where the undersea craft had last been seen. As a too-late demonstration, an explosive from one of the flying machines hit the sea with a resounding bang and raised a small geyser from the depths.

"I'm going to say good-bye to this sort of thing," hurriedly announced Billy; "we're likely to get it next. Give her power, Buddy."

Henri filled the order with all that the machinery possessed, and out of the spray the seaplane took the air like a kite, darting at a sharp angle away from the air space occupied by the war-bird fleet.

The latter collection volunteered a starting signal for the boys in the way of a spiteful rattle of machine guns, and then every plane in the bunch lined out as a pacemaker for the seaplane, now going like the wind in the supposed direction of the Italian coast-line.

In a race like this, and a machine of extra power, the young aviators considered the mile ahead they had attained all sufficient for a sure getaway from their present pursuers. But the petrol supply! That was the big worry to Henri, in the little engine room. Even with the extraordinary capacity of the tanks, they had been heavily drawn upon by voyaging of unusual duration and occasion more than once to indulge in consuming bursts of speed.

Billy, in every minute of this final effort to reach a haven of rest and safety, shared the anxiety of his chum in regard to the power-making liquid, and whether or not it would hold out until land was in sight—that land upon which they could look without fear of hostile rebuke.

As the Bangor boy had several times reiterated, it was “stay with the plane this time, Buddy, as long as there’s a splinter left.” Though there had been no help for it, Billy was still nursing a sore memory of the first-class aeroplane that went out of commission on Trentino heights.

While the moon shone resplendent, the young pilot had no difficulty in keeping true course, and if the worst happened to the petrol tanks, it was his fervent wish that if the coast had not then been reached, at least a protecting warship could be located before a full stop would put the seaplane at the mercy of the aerial fleet so persistently trailing it.

"Harbor lights to the front," sang out Henri, in a joyful note.

"Going to make it like a top," was Billy's happy assurance. "But what do you think of the nerve of those fellows following us in here?" The puzzled questioner had diverted attention from the wheel long enough to steal a glance rearward at the oncoming aeroplanes.

Up to this minute it had not occurred to either of the boys that the air fleet might not, after all, be Austrian craft. Indeed, since the first bounce out of the water, leaving the submarine vicinity when the bomb stirred up a fountain, the young aviators had never been near enough to the flying flock to particularly note colors or other distinguishing marks. Haste, distance and the deception of moonlight made pardonable such lack of intelligent observation.

With cylinders missing fire and much clanking in the engine room, the seaplane went down to water in a hurry, about "as dry as a bone," Henri said. On polished floats, the airship drifted into dock at Ravenna.

Twenty minutes afterward the boys came face to face with their late pursuers.

CHAPTER VI.

AN ERRAND OF EMERGENCY.

ON shore Henri was immediately engaged in lively explanation of the seaplane's dip at this unseemly hour, and the guardians of the waterfront were not altogether amenable to reason. When the boy had exhausted about his entire stock of Italian, and the impression hardly noticeable, quite welcome was an unexpected diversion in the approach of a new element of investigation. The young aviators had the joint experience of a shoulder grip, an arresting demonstration which concluded with a jerk that brought the suspects face about.

Every threat faded in the one second of recognition—the lads were eye to eye with the veteran air scouts, Luigi and Moroni! "Tell it not in Venice," muttered the former, relaxing his hold on Billy, and lifting hands overhead. As for Moroni, his comment was slower in coming, but no lack of grim humor when the words broke out. Turning to the other operators of the just landed collection of flying machines, he advised them, in mock-serious manner, that sentence would now be passed upon the prisoners—confinement to bed before sunrise.

In the general talk that followed, Billy and Henri learned that the submarine with which they had unwillingly been playing neighbor was, no doubt, the very same prowler only yesterday coming within a hairline of sinking an Italian cruiser in the Gulf of Venice.

"If it had not been for the noise we made in running down that lane of moonshine," declared one of the soldier-aviators, "the bomb might have found something solid when it hit."

"A seaplane, for instance," was Billy's quiet jest in the ear of his chum.

When the lads got under blankets just in advance of dawn, Henri, laughing, had the last say—"we didn't give the crowd a diagram of our little side trip. How careless!"

"Tell it to the court-martial," mumbled Billy.

The sleepers heard the rousing call all too soon in the morning, but they responded promptly, the requirement of soldier summons, and it was the seaplane which led the fleet in northerly flight to Grado, one of the Austrian coast ports captured by the Italians, and from which the lights of Trieste can be seen at night across the Adriatic.

Among the aviators at this port were several who had witnessed, further north in the mountain country, the Italian winning of Plava pass, at the cost of whole regiments cut to pieces, and who had also operated along the chain of mountain tops, villages

and stations encircling the still resisting Gorizia. "For unbridled fury," said one of the airmen, "the fighting up there puts a red splash on the war map as big as a blanket."

Although Billy and Henri had already been on the edge of this particular conflict, they were none the less interested in the narration of thrilling experiences by their fellow craftsmen in the bloody maelstrom. "It might happen, pard," remarked the Bangor boy to his flying partner, "that we will get a shove into the Gorizia bombardment. The aviation boss hasn't said anything yet about another sea trip for us in the near future."

Henri was not anticipating just then. He was giving attention to the approach of an Italian officer in full cavalry uniform, with sweeping cavalry cape and shining helmet, and a heavy saber and spurs which rattled as he moved along.

"Some size and style about that fellow," was the admiring comment of the Trouville lad.

"That's Captain Vespia," volunteered the airman, who had been telling about the Gorizia campaign.

"'Vespia?'" interposed Billy. "Wonder if he's any relation to Antonio?"

The officer's stride had brought him near enough to catch at least the rising accent on the mentioned name.

He bestowed a searching glance upon the little

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group of birdmen, a look of evident interrogation as to the last speaker.

The Bangor boy so interpreted it, stepping forward, with salute and best manner. "Heard your name, sir, and it reminded me of another mighty fine man to whom my partner and I owe a great deal. Spoke too loud, I guess, and hope there is no offense."

The captain, perfectly understanding the language of the address, seemed to have taken Billy's speech in good part, and was rather amused at the lad's cleverly turned compliment.

"It is true," he said, "that of Antonios there are many, but of my brother in the mountains I happened to be thinking at the moment I heard him named, and so would inquire if it were he or another who had been called to mind."

With the others at a respectful distance, Billy, elated that he could talk right off the reel, without a third man to elucidate, gave the officer the main details of their adventure with that Vespia who, as the relater worded it, was "a stout prop in a pinch."

The result was that the young scouts marched off with the captain, who insisted that they make a continued story out of Billy's synopsis, which interest was still in force the next morning, when two who were not cavalrymen rode up the valley with a gallant troop commanded by Antonio's brother.

It had been many a day since the boys swung a leg over a good horse, but their saddle-wise method of riding showed the troopers that the equestrian education of the youngsters had not been neglected.

Why they had been permitted to escape from aviation duty, for the day even, Billy and Henri were not enlightened. It was up to Captain Vespia, and no burden to the new cavalrymen.

Hard riding and few halts soon brought the troopers with whom our boys were mixing into range of that area where the Italian pressure was most in evidence, and where the forces directed by Gen. Cadorna were continuing to attack with unabated fierceness the Austro-Hungarian army, under Gen. Boroëvic, standing like a wall in defence of Goeritz, that pit of a great amphitheater, with battles raging on the heights on three sides of the town.

Following the line of the Isonzo River the young scouts had numerous opportunities of observing from the level the novel use of special machinery, devised by an Italian automobile concern, in carrying the heavy guns to great heights, but it was not until the third day, on the great plain they were crossing, that Billy and Henri hit into something they could count as a field adventure of their very own.

In the habits of their profession as aviators, ever the fixed one, the lads frequently scanned the sky

canopy in search of the aerial contingent which the Austrians were constantly employing in their fighting maneuvers, and were many times disappointed that not a wing was working when they looked.

Henri, however, finally got a speck in range of vision, and, with Billy's attention attracted thereto, the boys reined in their horses to watch the bobbing dot on the azure arch and await with interest its gradual development, in lowering process, into a full-fledged biplane, bent on some errand of information hunting or infliction of damage by bomb throwing. The machine was for a time too far distant to judge exactly which military cause it was serving. Identity, though, was not long lacking, for when the flyer was directly over one of the Italian batteries several ground flashes furnished sure indication that bombs were being served from above. In immediate retaliation a giant cannon posted on the mountain side sent a shell hurtling through the air, and the tremendous detonation of the hissing missile in close proximity to the scudding air craft had the instant effect of crumpling the wings of the war bird.

"They've got her!" Billy's excited announcement was made when the stricken biplane started on the down-run, all of a flutter, and every desperate endeavor of the pilot to catch a balance apparently of no avail.

The boys put their horses to the gallop in eager

desire to reach the place where the crippled plane must alight, forgetting all but the one point, that, enemy or not, some fearless fellows in their own profession might be lying, crushed out of existence, under the wrecked mass of machinery and rigging.

Very much alive, however, were the two Austrians who stepped out of the fallen aeroplane, which had landed without complete smash-up, owing to skillful handling. The shell concussion had caused the tumble, but the pilot had won at the finish from death.

The aviators, their invasion having ended in disaster to the carrying craft, had no further action to present save surrender with good grace, and were smilingly facing a group of Italian infantrymen when Billy and Henri rode up and dismounted.

The taller of the two captured birdmen, as the boys made their appearance in the circle, suddenly moved toward the newcomers with extended hands and an exclamation of joyful surprise, but as hastily subsided into stolid composure when he realized by second thought that the lads were in the Italian service.

There was no hesitation, though, on the part of Billy in giving voice to word of recognition upon closer inspection of the birdman who had wavered between the two promptings—to know or not to know.

“Stanny!”

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The Bangor boy saw before him no other than Stanislaws, the good and gallant friend of the stirring days in the great Austrian fortress of Przemyśl, before it was captured by the Russians.

Henri, too, came to the front in the second that he had his look at the familiar features of the old acquaintance, and joined with Billy in unrestrained greeting.

The boys had last seen "Stanny" a captive of the Russians, and had been entrusted by him to rescue a treasure belt from its place of concealment in a fortress bastion, which same treasure the lads had left in hiding at Warsaw, awaiting the day when it might be recovered by its owner.

And, now, as in the hour of the last meeting in the little town of Sandomir, when Stanislaws, a haggard prisoner in faded blue, had looked askance at the green garb of the Muscovite soldier to which the young aviators had then changed by force of circumstances, the same question narrowed the keen, gray eyes of the Austrian.

"It's just another case of toss about, Stanny," explained Billy; "and I guess we'll have to stand for it until the fighting colors are exhausted."

The assumed reserve in the Austrian's manner merged into a moment's abandon, when he said quickly, in low-pitched tone, and in German: "I most feared to harm you by over friendly attention.

But, really, it is fine to meet you both once more, even though I am prisoner to the enemy."

Hardly the passing of three or four minutes in this reunion of former comrades, yet evidently causing some suspicion in the mind of an infantry lieutenant, particularly the use of a language he could not understand. This officer quite curtly ordered that the prisoners be taken to detention quarters at the rear, and was showing inclination to interrogate Billy and Henri. These youths, however, had remounted their horses, and wasted no time in urging the animals into speedy progress toward the station of the troop commanded by Captain Vespia.

The surly lieutenant, having instituted camp inquiry and learning that the boys were experts from the aviation corps, and only cavalymen by favor, secured an order from headquarters, directing them to proceed forthwith in repair work on the damaged aeroplane.

The labor of readjusting the parts affected by the jar of the shell explosion proved a task easily performed in a couple of hours, and the biplane could be warranted to go again when required. The young scouts had no idea when they were revamping the machine that it was their own safety which was being insured by the thoroughness of the job.

Much to the surprise, then, of the lads came the unexpected command that aroused them in the early dawn of the following morning, an abrupt bidding

to report at once to the division headquarters. Having no opportunity to communicate with Captain Vespia, Billy and Henri went down the line for orders, the purport of which they could but blindly anticipate.

Once in the imposing presence of Colonel Marino, a heroic leader in recent brilliant action in the northern zone of Monte San Michele, the boys began to feel that they were honored by the summons, and not the victims of military imposition.

It was an adjutant, however, from whom the aviators received instructions as to the service they were expected to render, and at his elbow the infantry lieutenant, who had accepted the surrender of the Austrian aviators on the day previous.

"These are the young men of the aerial profession, I believe," said the spokesman officer, with a kindly smile, and without noticing the volunteered nod of the lieutenant, he continued in direct address to the boys: "We have an errand, signors, which requires your kind of skill, and while it involves no more than the usual grave risk of aviation just now, it is quite important that a successful outcome be recorded."

The speaker produced from under his cloak a small book enclosed in shiny leather cover.

"Here," he further remarked, "is the signal code which our foemen of the air forces are using, and

forty miles distant is the commander who should have it for immediate inspection."

"Get it to him in forty minutes, sir," promptly stated Billy, "if the motors are any good at all."

The adjutant thrust the code book into the hands of the Bangor boy, as the latter finished his speed prediction, and with the concluding admonition, "do not fail." The lieutenant took this as his cue to hustle the young birdmen into the open and give them the routing to the faraway town nestling against the mountain base, where the brigade chief was served by countless thousands, foot and horse, and in the air by a hundred flying machines.

Billy and Henri learned from the infantryman in their hurried walk to the level where the biplane was in waiting that he was proudly responsible for the discovery, an hour or two before, of the code book in the bootleg of one of the prisoners; in the interval a copy had been made and decision reached as to the quickest way of dispatch to the fighting center. "The only aeroplane on the ground to-day," said the lieutenant, "was the Austrian machine, and the only competents to run it within reach at the moment were yourselves. Now you know, signors, why the choice of emergency fell upon you."

"Didn't think you'd approve, from the way you acted yesterday," observed Henri, while closely inspecting the motor end of the biplane prior to the getaway.

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The soldier shrugged his shoulders. "My betters in rank have settled the question. My suspicion is no more—but"—the officer hesitated—"if it had been me who talked strangely into the ear of the enemy, I think I would take a receipt for his precious record when I delivered it."

"Say, my friend," remarked Billy, "you mustn't let such ideas bump you. Whatever we carry is a registered parcel, insured at the very go."

With this pardonable near approach to a boast, the young pilot turned his attention to the rudder wheel and the process of guiding the aircraft upward.

CHAPTER VII.

A PLUNGE IN THE RIVER.

To avoid similar misadventure to that which had befallen the Austrian airmen, the boys set their course away from the high ground where lively artillery duels were of hourly occurrence, and which scattered engagements concentrated into one terrific uproar near the Gorizia bridgehead, seven Italian divisions of infantry then spiritedly attacking the tenacious foe under cover of a curtain of fire.

The young aviators were unable, at the distance, to decide which of the contending forces had the best of it, and their present assignment had been too strictly impressed to admit of deviation to act as umpires.

"There's a lot of ammunition going up in smoke over there." Billy passed the comment back to his chum, but with all the noise of air travel and the added thunder of battle there was little chance of his being heard.

And, too, the fixed destination of the aeroplane's flight was already in view, keeping Henri so busy working signals that he had no attention to divide.

"It's all right now, Buddy," presently shouted the observer; "give 'er the slant!"

The "slant" carried the biplane swiftly to earth, and rolling to a stop in front of the "town hall," converted to military purpose. To the officer first emerging from the building, the boys, or, rather, Henri, speaking Italian for the firm, explained the nature of their mission.

Without question the greeting soldier waved the young scouts an invitation to enter the structure, and shortly after they received honorable quittance of responsibility for the valuable package which had been entrusted to them. That the code record was considered of prize quality, had proof in the earnest study given it by the strategists assembled. It was an aviation officer who said, with a slap of the knee: "Not all the news they get from on high to-morrow will be accurate. What a heyday for right men under wrong colors!"

The boss airman accompanied the lads when they left the building, and, seeing the machine in which the messengers had arrived, instantly put the question to his young companions: "Where did you pick up that craft? It does not come from the same paint shop as ours, and I'll wager it was built nearer to Vienna than to Naples."

"It's an Austrian plane," replied Henri, "knocked down by shell-burst and with its drivers an easy capture. That's how the code book came your way."

"You had a risk, then, in descending here with

that sort of boat," commented the aviation chief.

"But you must remember, sir," interposed Billy, "that there were right colors this time in the wrong locker."

The Italian laughed at this sally. "Saved by signals," as the war correspondent would write it, he observed. "It has just occurred to me, that there is the very vehicle for our code trick." The last statement was one of serious contemplation.

Our Young Aeroplane Scouts inferred that their assignment to the mentioned craft was completed, for the present at least, and were much more gratified than disappointed in the belief that veterans of the flying corps at this station would naturally be selected to develop the plan of deception.

As the Bangor boy sized up the situation, and as he stated it: "I don't think, Buddy, even if asked we could drill through this thing inside of a couple of days, and, way down in my boots, I am not crazy about trying."

"Maybe you're thinking about Stanny," suggested Henri, unconsciously betraying his own trend of thought.

"Maybe I am," admitted Billy, "he helped save our lives once; and, anyhow, we've already done all we were expected to do."

At the mess table that evening Billy and Henri struck up an acquaintance with a likeable young fellow, Frank, by given name and nature, a daring

operator of one of the big motor cars in constant use at the front. This lad hailed from Rome, had been quite a traveler, and conversed well in English.

"Like to give you a ride," cordially proposed the new friend, "if the ground is not too common a level for people who sail the air, and if the captain does not kick."

"Can't hand you either acceptance or regrets just now, old top," said Billy. "But my social secretary here," jogging Henri with his elbow, "may let you know in the morning."

It came about that there were no after-breakfast demands for the boys' services as aviators. "Might as well try for an excursion in that military limousine of Frank's," observed the Bangor boy, when he found that the Austrian plane had disappeared from its canvas hangar, and the chief of the flyers was nowhere to be found.

The young scouts were about to give up even their search for Frank, so long a tramp had they taken in seeking him, but, as luck would have it, the soldier-chauffeur suddenly appeared in his big car, coming at break-neck speed down the nearest mountain road. At sight of the boys, the motorist checked the rush on striking the level, and bade them climb aboard if they were going with him.

"Just took Captain Catalano to the top, and now I'm off to hustle up the ammunition wagons poking somewhere along the river."

Nothing to prevent, Billy and Henri bounced into the car, the former youth gaily advising the driver "not to hold the taxi while the counter was working."

From that moment the passengers did all the "holding," for among reckless operators of automobiles that Roman speeder soon demonstrated that he was the limit. "Over this route a hundred times," he glibly assured his guests, "and never hit anything yet."

"If you did," intimated Henri, "there is no doubt but that you'd go right through it."

No "coming event" had then "cast its shadow before," yet less than a mile distant, footing the steep incline of a dangerous curve, closely bordering the turbid sweep of the river, one of the massive trucks in the very wagon train that Frank was hunting, was down on a collapsed forewheel, a solid block, immovable, and sidewise preempting all but a few feet of the narrow descending roadway.

Only a cannon-ball could dent that sort of obstruction, and the next sure thing, any forceful impact with the load of high explosives on the stranded vehicle would mean a stupendous lift of all that was movable in a mile radius.

The big car, swaying, bumping, jarring, in the rough spots, careering like a greyhound on the smooth stretches, onrushed to the blind trail, with death and destruction lurking in the deep-cut bend.

As the soldier-chauffeur neared the rounding of the road he exercised the first noticeable precaution credited to him since he started the extra speed exhibit for the entertainment of his new friends. That opportune slowing up was all that prevented the greater catastrophe, but too late to save the machine and its occupants from the directly appalling offshoot over the river bank and through falling space of twenty feet into the chill current below.

The lad at the guiding wheel of the car, by lightning calculation, after startled downward glimpsing of the peril ahead, cut off power and set every brake to grinding. Owing to declivity the impetus of the weighty automobile was too great for immediate overcoming, and the scant offering of three feet of passing room forced the disastrous swerve.

As the machine plunged, our boys were making desperate attempts to push off the side curtains of the car, which overturned in the fall and struck the water upside down. Following the great splash, and by the sustaining presence of a sandspit, the imprisoned occupants of the capsized and more than half-submerged auto had a breathing chance to escape being drowned like rats in a trap.

Frank, at the fore, was the first to get out, and though close to drowning in the effort, showed rare presence of mind in pulling a knife from his pocket and with one free hand slashing the leather enclosure of the tonneau, behind which Billy and Henri were

gasping in final endeavor to keep their chins above water.

Through the opening of the severed curtains the boys forced heads and shoulders, and, just over the level of the river current, worked forward and clear of the wreck by aid of swimming stroke.

Down the embankment then were coming men from the road above, those in charge of the munitions train, white-faced war veterans though they were, and with small expectation of viewing other than the watery grave of the motorists. The members of the descending party had, too, the nerve-racking experience just behind them of dread anticipation when the leaping car missed by only a few inches boring into pent-up, combustible fury.

Realizing, at sight of the three lads, above water and struggling shoreward, that a seeming miracle had been wrought, a dozen of the soldiers dashed into the tide to lend a helping hand, and presently, within two minutes indeed, the rescued youths rested on dry land, a little dazed, still trembling from over-exertion and thoroughly chilled by immersion in the icy flow—but a long way from being down and out.

Provided with a change of garments from a general supply wagon, the lads were then all concerned with a plan to lift the car out of the river-bed, which was accomplished by rope attachments, with plenty of horsepower at the hauling end.

When the "squabbled" wheel of the ammunition truck had been carefully replaced with a new one and the damaged automobile repaired to the extent of running easily when coupled to a wagon-tail, the procession resumed slow movement toward army headquarters.

"Won't they read the riot act to you, old boy, about that car?" Billy made the solicitous inquiry of Frank, while they clung to precarious perches on top of a tall load of provision boxes.

"Nothing to worry about, comrade," assured the venturesome motorist; "that machine has been near to the scrap-heap quite often, and it always responds to doctoring. Besides, the crowd we're with now say that we ought to have a medal apiece for dodging that ammunition truck."

"Keep all the badges you get for that trick," put in Henri; "Buddy and I plead guilty of trying to quit you before you got half way down the hill."

Whatever the "session" between the young Roman and the officer to whom he made accounting, our boys knew that the supposed culprit was not very deep in punishment, for they saw him driving another motor the next day, with a general and two colonels in it.

Of the two airmen, though, who had essayed, on high, to reverse the Austrian code, no word had been received, from or about, and the aviation chief gave the young scouts the gloomy eye when they

asked for news of the venture. "Ran into crossfire, perhaps," was the rueful comment of the officer questioned, "and a gallant pair they were, too."

"Never can tell for sure what may happen in the flying game," gravely stated Billy, "and sometimes the lost are found."

This note of hope failed of impression upon the boss airman. In him the premonition was firmly implanted—that these brave birdmen of his would never come back.

"By the rule of the field," observed Henri, as his chum and himself walked away, "two out means two in. Our call is coming."

As a prophet the Trouville lad again advanced a peg, for the boys were very soon recalled for further interview with the aviation chief. "Are either of you qualified to draw a map from high point of view?"

In response to the officer's quick query, Billy turned a thumb towards his flying partner. "He can do it," were the words supplementing the gesture.

"I can try," amended Henri, "but the outlines are bound to be rough and lacking accurate measure."

"Get in the lay of the land," advised the chief, "and certain positions thereon, and that is about all we could expect, considering the conditions you may encounter."

"Hope you will not forget, sir, that my partner and I work much better together than separately."

"Oh, ho, I see," smilingly remarked the boss aviator, "my map maker wants a concession. Well, the pair of you for it, and both of you will realize that it is no feast-day experience which you are going to have."

To fly over the battle vortex, the veritable war volcanoes of Doberdo plateau and Mount Pordgora, the bloody slopes of San Michele and Sabotino, the course reckoned for the young birdmen, was no holiday undertaking. The grim prediction of the air chief was void of jest.

Our boys, now fully advised of the line of flight, and just what was to be accomplished, had much to wonder about, in that they had been chosen for such a test of courage and skill when there were so many medal men with the aerial corps at this station.

The truth of the matter was, that every day here the demand for aviators exceeded the visible supply, and Billy and Henri had simply drawn the next out numbers of the two missing experts, the supposed fate of whom rankled in the mind of their chief.

With utmost care the boys went over the parts of the military biplane in which they were to make the perilous journey, and were wholly satisfied that the machine was fit to win through if not peppered by lead.

Henri was equipped with map-making materials, not an elaborate outfit, but enough to get on the

board a sort of snapshot record of the landscape. The aviation chief personally conferred with the lads at the starting point, and gave them himself the word to go.

Rocketing from the valley, the wide-winged mechanical bird set its steel beak against the mountain breeze freshly blowing from the north, even so high, scented by burnt powder and the more oppressive odor of the countless unburied dead.

Over and over again the Italian attempts to smash through the Austrian lines by weight of iron, again and again the roar of the cannonade, infantry charges and counter-charges, flame-lit trenches—all in the panorama unrolled beneath the lofty onrush of the flying machine operated by Our Young Aeroplane Scouts.

Henri, intent upon his hasty drafting, sought no other impression than that in his work, while Billy had no other thought than to steer clear of high-placed batteries.

Such was the speed maintained by the biplane that almost before the young pilot realized it, the aircraft hovered directly over the besieged town, upon which the severe bombardment of days and days had already inflicted incalculable damage.

How they had penetrated thus far into hostile territory, the very center of resisting action, unchallenged by the Austrian air patrol and unscathed by long-range fire, was an unsolvable something

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which the boy aviators had then no time nor inclination to probe with conjecture.

Neither did assurance develop that the same luck, or what you may call it, would serve in the back-tracking.

That return problem, however, had to be met, and without delay.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE CENTER OF TURMOIL.

BILLY had been advised by airmen having knowledge of this corner of Austrian territory that there was more than one spot hereabouts in possession of Italian advance columns, and in casting about for a new route to get back to starting point, a line of travel less disturbed by bursting shell and screaming shrapnel, the young pilot happened to strike the direction of San Pietro, a safe town, flanking Gorizia.

"Swing your colors, Buddy," was the word that went over shoulder to Henri.

Comprehending that his comrade intended to take a chance on a drop and catching sight himself of spires and clustered buildings far below, with convincing evidence of friendly occupation, the observer made prompt showing of the streamer that would insure a reception other than from gun muzzles.

The pilot's idea was to rest for a few hours, cool the mechanism of the over-driven aeroplane, and, also, to find out just how things were going in this red-hot section. The boys had skimmed through

the day over a lot of fighting, but so swiftly and so far above it, that they gained little else than a confused jumble of impressions as to results.

With every caution and much circling, Billy lowered the biplane into the square surrounded by the main buildings of the town, now practically an armed camp.

Henri did considerable saluting and talked a blue streak in Italian before the credentials of the young scouts were accepted for full worth by the investigating officer. The latter appeared to be greatly interested when informed of the route by which the boys had arrived, and the topographical jottings of the Trouville lad were subjected to close scrutiny.

While his chum was satisfying the military exactions, Billy tinkered with the biplane, in anticipation of early resumption of flight. In this occupation the boy was interrupted by the particularly forward conduct of a couple of brawny fellows in aviators' garb, one of whom was resting his right arm in a sling and the other displaying a decided limp.

This pair were more than idly curious in their manner of inspecting the just landed machine, and the Bangor lad was beginning to grow ireful at being pushed aside, when all at once both of the men blended exclamations at the discovery of a number stenciled on the lid of the tool locker in the body of the craft. The verbal outbreak was as

Greek to Billy, but the excited motions of the two were unmistakable signs of an agitating find.

The next thing he knew, the young scout was under a flood of questions, the tide of which he was unable to stem by the most vehement exercise of negative movement of head and hands.

First aid to the overwhelmed lad was furnished by an English-speaking soldier, who had evidently received his call to the colors on the other side of the ocean, and by his interpretation Billy was apprised that he had been driving an aeroplane claimed by the excitable strangers as their own particular flying outfit.

"Then you must be the missing couple for whom the chief has been in mourning," cried the enlightened youth. "Hi, Henri, old top," Billy loudly called, "come over here and see what the wind has blown in!"

Henri immediately set about the straightening process, with the result that the four were firmly cemented in brotherly bonds in less than five minutes.

The boys learned that the older aviators had encountered motor trouble while above one of the trench-lined slopes, were compelled to descend in a storm of crossfire and dragged just in time within the dugout shelter of Italian riflemen. The aeroplane they were driving was blown to pieces a moment later. One of the airmen was wounded in

the arm by a shell fragment and the other suffered a contusion of the knee in the forceful process of hurried rescue.

"As it looks to me," proposed Billy, "the very proper thing to do is for you men to take this machine and hustle back to headquarters. It will be a treat to the chief, and Henri and I won't mind a bit of a stay here. In this war zone we have no choice of visiting places."

"Good idea," agreed Henri, then explaining the suggested arrangement to the aviator with the limp, the latter, in turn, arguing the matter with his comrade. The conference resulted in favor of Billy's proposition. "With my compliments to the boss," said the Trouville lad, when he called the attention of the departing airmen to his act of carefully storing the map-board in the biplane locker.

"And it's lucky," was Billy's farewell remark, "that only one of you is crippled in the arms, for otherwise this scheme wouldn't do."

The man who sat at the rudder wheel—they called him Giuseppe—had his final say before the machine shot into the air: "Of silk like you are, signors, the finest." This dash into English was a supreme effort on the part of the aviator, and he certainly spoke as if he meant what he said.

Billy and Henri went about among the soldiery pretty much as they pleased, and their reputed prowess as birdmen, coupled with the generally cir-

culated story of the remarkable restoration of the army aeroplane to its original operators, put the boys in a sort of limelight that invariably attracted kindly attentions from both the staff and the rank and file.

The lads had been in San Pietro for about a week, and encouraged by the intimation of an officer of high degree, with whom they had cultivated a very pleasant acquaintance, that it might soon be possible to put a biplane at their disposal, the young scouts were quite content to graciously accept their enforced stay on the ground.

It actually turned out, however, and emphasizing the usual shift from any cut-and-dried proceedings in the affairs of Our Young Aeroplane Scouts, that they did not leave San Pietro in any expected way.

As from the clouds, and really from the mountain tops, suddenly descended, in the midst of a snow-storm, that bold spirit of the high places, Antonio Vespia, still untrammelled as to military rule, but as ever zealous to serve in his own way the cause that he loved.

The boys were indulging in a snowballing frolic, when the giant mountaineer put in astonishing appearance, and both of the youths were speechless for the moment in the presence of their former guide and much-admired friend. The first sign of recovery was a joint rush and a pump-handling of the big fellow's hands.

"How did you know we were here?" Billy, in his enthusiasm, took it for granted that Antonio had arrived for the one purpose of this reunion.

The free lance broadly smiled. "It was, I think, the hand of fortune that directed me hither," he said. "I knew not that I would meet you, but that it is so I am grateful."

Henri, eager to speak, launched into the story of their coming north with the mountaineer's soldier brother, and as eager the listener to hear all that could be told.

"Would it please you, signors, to pursue with me your journey southward? With one brief delay, I may seek with you that brother and the others in the Isonzo valley."

"Count us in, chief," instantly decided Billy, sure and certain of Henri's approval. "We've been waiting for a ride, but it won't hurt us to foot it for a change."

"There is some danger and much hardship in my undertaking," warned Antonio, who was averse to anything like false pretense.

"Where is the soft spot in this war business? I have asked it before, and I ask it again."

Billy's pointed query seemed unanswerable and as disposing of the guide's well meant caution.

That they were to look into the very heart of this embattled region, to be in actual touch with the very bone of contention for which already immense con-

tending armies had sacrificed thousands of men, the boys had not the slightest premonition. "Some danger," was a warning of broad construction, but it included, by the proof, a secret visit to war-torn Goeritz!

With that now extraordinary experience before them, the lads followed, without question or care, their leader through many devious mountain ways, by paths seldom trod by human foot, skirting fathomless depths, but under that wonderful guidance, unerring and undaunted, resting at last in crevice concealment near the beleaguered town.

Antonio, in the breathing spell, informed his young companions that this detour insured an exit from the immediate circle of fire and commotion, and, if his memory served him right, an unmolested journey to the sea. "As I have told you," he said, "my lot has been cast in these mountains of Austria, and seeking independence far from the haunts of men, many ways in the fastnesses have been opened to me. Even here," he continued, indicating the town by a wide sweep of the arm, "am I known, and as 'queer.' It is a good mask, that belief, just now," concluded the mountaineer, "but in a certain house on the Carso this night, if it yet be standing, you shall meet one at least who greets the real Antonio."

The boys were perfectly well satisfied in their touring partnership with the big guide, assured

that with him there would always be something doing, and not of the humdrum nature, either.

With the closing in of evening shadows, and decided subsidence of artillery operations, Antonio advised the young scouts that he was going to leave them for a short while, in order to find out if along the Carso the house he sought had escaped destruction by that terrible shelling which had razed buildings, large and small, right and left.

It seemed to Billy and Henri that their friend and comrade had been absent far beyond the limit of any "short while," a belief largely promoted by the growing discomfort of cramp, chill and hunger, but such was the pleasurable relief afforded by the guide's return, even if apparently long delayed, that the boys forgot all about being impatient, and were "up and a-coming" when they got the invitation to "follow me."

Downstepping a tier of terraces, the trio found postern entrance in the back wall of extensive and well-kept grounds, in the center of which stood a dwelling of mansion size, and some distance removed from any other place of habitation.

Antonio was evidently well acquainted with the premises, and with the possible inmates of the house, for without ceremony of knocking or bell-ringing, he pushed open the first door that presented itself and marched in, with the boys at his heels.

At the end of a long hall the impromptu guests

ushered themselves into a veritable haven of cosy comfort, a tastefully furnished room, softly illumined by open firelight and the glow of a student's lamp reposing on the green-baize top of a large table, also containing piles of books and papers.

"A quick return, my good Antonio"—this the hail of a deeply musical voice proceeding from an adjoining apartment, and immediately succeeded by the appearance of the speaker, a fine specimen of manhood, in head, shoulders and upper body, but evidently doomed to sitting posture, the occupant of a wheeled chair, operated by levers in the hands of the semi-invalid.

It was a face that reminded the boys of some of the heroic sculptures they had seen in Rome, and in the eyes that were inquiringly turned upon them, the youths read a story both of high courage and gentle resignation.

"Master of the heights, magician of minerals, prince of gentlemen," was Antonio's introduction of the host.

The latter shook a playfully menacing finger at the exploiter. "You have changed little, my good Antonio. From your manner of speech the wings have never been clipped."

The young scouts were standing in respectful attitude, awaiting further word from Antonio. "To the master then," continued the mountaineer, "let me

present also seekers of eagle haunts, the flying boys, and my friends."

When the man in the chair gave the lads cordial hand-grip, the recipients of the courtesy were ready and willing to enlist as his guards for the balance of their days. "He's just great," was the way Billy later expressed it.

The host struck a bell on the table near at hand, and the summons brought on the quick-step a young-old man, perennial youth in his ruddy face, and the crown of years in his silvery hair. "Happy hour this, Guido," cried Antonio at sight of the sturdy servitor, who responded with a cheery "Si, Signor." "A grand climber in his day, master," observed the mountaineer, while Guido was busying himself in arranging a tea-table in front of the fireplace.

Over the cups and the well-filled plates brave old reminiscences of perilous ascents and descents passed between the veteran participants—Alpine adventures on those lofty ranges of Tyrol, Styria, Salzburg and Carinthia.

There was only allusion to the strongest bond between the entertainer of the night and his beloved guest, Antonio, and notwithstanding the quick turning aside of the subject by the guide, the boys knew in whose arms the hopelessly crippled climber had been carried for many miles after the fall that maimed him.

"You must have spiked all the guns on the heights, my friends, before you dropped in upon me, for the quiet this night is unusual." Strange to relate, it was the first reference by the host to the conflict that had been raging for many weeks within a few miles of this very house.

"It's a pretty town you have here, sir, from what I saw of it to-day," said Henri, "but it will, I'm afraid, look like another Arras or Ypres before the shooting is done. Billy and I saw those ruins in Belgium."

Antonio, as the midnight hour chimed in the silver clock above the fireplace, reminded his young friends that between now and daybreak they would have to get sleep enough to last them for quite a stretch across some rough country.

The host lifted a hand in protest at this hint of early departure, but Antonio, quietly insistent, passed the word to Guido to show the boys where they might rest. As Billy and Henri were speaking their farewell to the man in the chair, he wheeled to a desk in a corner of the room, opened a drawer therein, and, turning again to the wondering youths, tendered to each of them a ring, signet set, curious and costly. A significant nod from Antonio bade acceptance of the gifts.

"Souvenirs, my lads, of your cheering presence in the home of a shut-in, and with the hope that these

circlets may sometime command you good will and service from my friends of the Alpini. Fare thee well."

When the aviators walked into the hall, following the faithful attendant of the house, they left Antonio and their new friend, hand-clasped and earnestly conversing.

The next time the boys saw their guide it was through slumber-laden eyes, in the half-light of a curtained bedroom, and the disturber of their peace was all equipped for mountain travel, including bulging knapsack, alpenstock and rope coil at his side.

Below stairs the young-old servitor was in waiting with a piping hot breakfast, and twenty minutes later Antonio and his young companions cautiously regained the crevice that had first concealed them the evening before.

Here again the craft of the mountaineer was displayed and in evidence his intimate knowledge of the ground traversed. In crouching movement the trio in single file trailed within the far-extending fissure to a point of contraction where crawling was an enforced method of locomotion, and the initial outlook from the end of the rocky burrow were canyon walls of sheer and immeasurable descent into a black void which the keenest vision could not penetrate.

"The last leap, I guess," muttered Billy, as Henri and himself wormed their way alongside of Antonio at the brink of this gigantic split dividing lofty levels.

CHAPTER IX.

NIGHT ADVENTURE ON TRIESTE PLAIN.

THAT Antonio had no idea of lingering very long on the edge of this precipice, no matter how ugly the aspect of any undertaking to leave it, was shown in the coolly deliberate manner with which he knotted and noosed a rope hold on a rock point, horn-shaped and just overhead in the crevice. Without the least hesitation the guide then swung his lengthy legs over and into space, the rope support drawing taut when the big fellow gradually suspended his whole weight on the stout hemp. Hardly though, had the head and shoulders of the mountaineer disappeared below the level when the rope relaxed in tension, relieved, apparently, of all strain at the pulling end.

The boys pushed their heads out into the vacuum as far as they could without losing body balance, but failed at the moment to discover the guide or the prop that might be upholding him. Antonio himself solved the mystery of his lodgment by the simple but effective device of extending from the face of the precipitous wall the alpenstock which he

had carried across his shoulders in descent and flagging the staff with his fancy neckerchief.

Less than twenty feet down, the mountaineer added the strength of his voice to the locating signal, in establishment of the fact that he had foothold and wanted the rest of the party to share it. Billy took the rope slide next, was received with open arms by Antonio and drawn to standing room on a broad ledge, concealed from upper view by a huge overhanging rock. Henri came swinging down a minute later, and Antonio then by deft manipulation released the rope noose at the top of the cliff.

"An old trail, my lads," remarked the guide, "and we are near to the early workings of an abandoned mine, one that the master and I discovered a long time ago. If the shaft is still open I will soon show you the road we used to travel when we sought solitude."

The mention of "the master" reminded Billy and Henri of their new possessions, the valuable rings, which they had carefully stored in the safety pockets of their jackets. Graven in the onyx seals were white line formations of the edelweiss, that Alpine plant which climbers covet—this revealed as the glittering baubles lay in the open palms of the examining youths. Antonio matched this proceeding by producing, from within his blouse front, an

exactly similar jewel, leather-threaded, and the gold hoop some worn by the friction of long carrying.

"What's the story?" demanded Billy. "And why is he master?"

The mountaineer stood looking aloft at the mingled blue and white, where a snow-covered crag seemed to join with the sky. Presently he said: "To the last, my lad, do I hold that by right of mind is he master. As to the story, it will come some day through the talismans he has conferred upon you. But let us away, for the hours are slipping."

Rounding the ledge, the face of the rock wall abruptly receded and a narrow roadway was still to be traced, curving yet further inward, though in many places the former cutting had been obliterated by the downroll of earth and rock. Antonio made short work of traversing this avenue of travel, and directly he and his companions were looking into the black mouth of an inclined shaft or "slope," a part of the deserted mine of which the guide had spoken.

The mountaineer extracted from his knapsack some brown paper in which Guido had wrapped several rolls of sausage, with other food provisions for the journey, balled the substance in his hands, touched a match to it and flung the blazing sphere with all his might into the shaft. He was seeking assurance that no noxious gases prevailed inside. Satisfied with the test, Antonio probed again in the

well-supplied knapsack for a small lantern, of the bullseye type, and without further preparation entered the hole in the rock. Billy and Henri followed their leader, and the trio shuffled down the incline, trailing the little disc of light that danced ahead of them.

They passed quite a number of cross-cuts at different levels, but the guide never deviated from the main tunnel, which might be reckoned as not altogether developed under the direction of the last owner—perhaps representing the labor and ingenuity of another and much more remote age.

Whatever the constructive history of this subterranean passage, it served the purpose of Antonio and his young friends in getting safely to the bottom of the canyon, and vastly in advance of that other one choice of breakneck endeavor outside. Remembering a certain remark of the mountaineer, Billy was ready to concede, at the finish of the descent, that “solitude” was there in plenty. Save for the splash, sigh and gurgle of a thin little stream trickling through and over the rocky bed of the cavernous depth, it was as still as death when the travelers emerged from the tunnel.

For days and weeks within near hearing of air-ripping explosions, constant and terrific reverberations, to the youthful campaigners this sudden quiet was next to being painful. There was no time given, however, to analyze the sensation. Antonio,

as restless as a stormy petrel, proved no laggard in these gloomy precincts. He kept the boys moving until Henri asserted that if the conductor expected him to have a leg left to walk with on the morrow it would be well to go into camp, for one limb already was simply a drag.

"I see, my lad," laughed Antonio, "that you still have the aeroplane habit, no matter how hard I have tried to break it."

"Now, pard," joked Billy, "don't hollow quit, or, as sure as shooting, you won't get into the Alpini society." The Bangor boy, had he honestly confessed, was himself on the thoroughly tired list.

"Just another mile," encouraged the guide, "and we will be breaking bread in the cave of Renault, high, dry, and warm."

"March on," declaimed the Trouville lad, whose grumbling moods were all of brief duration.

The mountaineer could have also informed the boys that it would require considerable climbing to reach the natural hotel, but evidently concluded to let them plod the last mile in the canyon in happy anticipation of their immediately taking well-earned ease.

At the finish, though, of the gorge journey, where the water of the stream had pooled, and with rotting logs and fungus growth made a dismal swamp, it was Henri himself who expressed the hope that

the promised resting place was in a more favored locality.

To scale the straight up and down wall that barred further progress Antonio knew just how to proceed. He called the attention of his companions to the rising line of cuttings in the rock face, of measured distance apart, and indicative of the purpose to which these interstices had been put.

"A stairway prepared for you, signors," observed the guide, "and the only passports needed are steady head and sure foot, with which you are both provided."

With no setbacks worthy of note, the trio surmounted the climbing difficulties, and two hundred feet up, Antonio found the deeper cleft for which he was looking.

"We are at home for the night, my friends," announced the mountaineer, pushing aside the bushes that hid the entrance of the cave.

"Gee, man, this is a cosy den!" So Billy exclaimed when he saw the inside of the cavity. "The one where we stopped in the other range wasn't a marker to this."

"There are many of the kind in the Alps," advised Antonio, "if you only know how to find them."

The embers of former campfires filled a bowl-like depression in the floor of the cavern, and roundabout were stacked piles of resinous wood. From this ample supply of fuel, Antonio got the material

for a blaze that spangled the quartz-filled walls of the enclosure with myriad shining points, also revealing a suspended collection of antlers, fox pelts and other furs and a floor exhibit of blanket rolls, rope coils and cooking utensils.

"Isn't there a chance of somebody holding us up for intruding?" asked Henri.

The guide solemnly shook his head. "The leader will come nevermore," he sadly observed, "and until the toll of death is fully taken in this feud of nations, who can know of the others?"

"I'll tell you one thing, chief," asserted Billy, "you've certainly given us some unusual turns on this last trip. Not very noisy, but far from dull."

"In another day," predicted Antonio, "you will again be in the midst of war's alarms."

The big mountaineer was in moving trim at the first show of morning light, and the boys, refreshed by the good rest of the night, joined with alacrity in completing the ascent to the summit of the surrounding heights.

From this mountain crest the Adriatic was in distant view, and it was Antonio's expressed intent to reach Grado within the next dozen hours if possible. Hiking across the plateau that lay before them, the three comrades passed down slope after slope until less than five miles intervened between their position and the point where the guide purposed to enter

the Trieste plain and so come quickly to the sea and the Italian frontier.

By the route they were traversing the travelers had avoided proximity to the Austrian mountain trenches, overlooking the Isonzo flats, and where about every chance would have been against getting through. That their progress so far had been without challenge or check, was credited by the boys to the foxy guidance of Antonio. The time was near at hand, however, when even greater caution must be exercised, for out in the open by day there was little opportunity for hiding and hardly a show to beat out pursuit by hostile cavalymen on patrol.

At the foot of the mountain the guide held council with his companions. "Our wisest plan," he said, "is to wait now until nightfall and go into the plain under cover of darkness. Fifteen miles with the best foot forward, and the foe may whistle as far as we are concerned."

Billy and Henri had no substitute for Antonio's proposal, and agreed to it without further discussion.

Just before the start was made a brisk wind that had been blowing from the west lapsed into a faintly sighing breeze, and with it departed a threat of rain that had prevailed in the early afternoon. A down-pour then would have illy served the pedestrians in crossing the lowlands, when rapid transit meant so much.

In the first two or three miles out, the walkers, barring an occasional stumble, had smooth going, and no indication then presented that any particular danger lurked in the wayside shadows.

To the acute hearing of Antonio came the sound that changed in a twinkling any existing belief that all was well. The guide halted so suddenly that Billy and Henri, plodding in his wake, bumped the leader and themselves in turn.

The mountaineer carrying the bullseye in the curve of an arm instantly doused the tiny gleam, and himself sought the ground the full length of his giant stature. The boys duplicated the movement. As yet they had heard nothing to alarm, but they knew that a good scout had set the example.

"What's the matter, chief?" Billy whispered the question when he had crawled alongside the big fellow.

"Listen!"

This low-spoken advice brought the ear of the Bangor boy close to earth, and then to him quite audible was the thud of iron-shod hoofs, oncoming; further evidence of cavalry approach manifested now by the rattle and clang of saber and stirrup.

"Horsemen headed this way!" Henri had awakened to the cause of Antonio's quick stop.

Looking toward the lights of Trieste, glimmering afar, and under the reflected faint glow casting downward from the sky, the watching trio, prone

upon the plain, could now see the silhouetted equestrian figures of forty or fifty troopers, in open formation, advancing, it seemed, in no great haste.

"Videttes," murmured Antonio, "and no telling where they will fix their line of outposts."

Had such information been available it would have been easy enough for the little party to get away from the menace of capture by crawling a hundred yards or so beyond the path of the mounted sentinels and then, with the advantage of more complete darkness, succeed in baffling all pursuit. But they had no means of knowing in which direction "the cat would jump," and nothing else to do but watch and wait for the worst or the best.

The suspense, however, was of brief duration. The cavalymen had reined their horses to a slow walk, and directly the larger number wheeled away in gallop westward.

That more than one of the troopers had remained in the immediate vicinity the three comrades were soon convinced by the sound of voices, the neigh of a horse and presently the snap and flame of a match, which illumined for an instant a bearded face, glinted on the shining helmet above it, and wafted abroad the odor of burning tobacco in the pipe of the smoker.

"The fellow's dismounted," Billy announced, and quickly adding, with the assurance of another sharp

look at the shadowy movement: "There's two of them on the ground."

These discoveries had set a brand new idea buzzing in the brain of the Bangor boy. A fair start on horseback, it occurred to him, would help a whole lot in making a clean getaway before the sure exposure of daylight.

Billy, under breath, briefly apprised his companions of the scheme he was nursing, and it hit them all in a heap, as the saying is. Antonio, by right of might, would, of course, figure as the main factor if the plan was developed by force, though the boys, as a combination, could be counted on to do their share in a pinch and at close grips.

The unsuspecting cavalrymen continued conversation, and once in awhile spoke loud enough for the listeners to catch a word or two, indicating that the talk was not in serious vein.

All the time the plotting trio were intent upon the task of wriggling by degrees nearer and nearer to where the horses were browsing about at short range from their riders, restrained from taking greater liberty by that usual device of equine training, the bridle reversed and hanging down from the bit.

To the saddles were attached all the shooting irons belonging to the troopers, and sabers were the only weapons then in reach of their hands.

The big mountaineer had both revolver and knife

in his belt, and just the thing for silent smiting was the alpenstock to which he had clung even when it became more of a weight than a necessity.

Billy, however, was more and more inclined to go the limit of strategy to gain the end in view. To kick up a racket of any sort might bring instant assistance to the men attacked—especially if the revolver was used by the guide—and it was not likely that both of the Austrians could be silenced at once by Antonio's club. If any yelling was done, reasoned the young scout, let it be after the horses had been secured and all off on a run. It was to be regretted that there were only two steeds to be had, but, after all, not so bad, for if three horses there would have been another soldier to fool or fight.

The Bangor boy crawled close to Antonio. "Let me have that bullseye," he whispered.

CHAPTER X.

AVIATORS TO THE RESCUE.

WITH the little lantern in his pocket, Billy stealthily worked his way to a point of vantage some fifty yards from where his comrades lay silently wondering as to the object of this mysterious maneuver.

But it was the troopers who actually realized the stir of curiosity created as a result of the squirming expedition of the Bangor boy. A tiny ball of fire danced up and down, described flashing circles, suddenly disappeared and as suddenly reappeared, over and over again.

Antonio and Henri heard one of the cavalrymen loudly call the attention of his fellow rider to something that was going on "in the grass over there." Both of the listeners understood the language of the exclaimer, and both elevated their heads to see what the soldier was talking about.

"Billy's doing that, I'll bet," volunteered Henri, with his lips close to the ear of the guide. The pair had caught a glimpse of the "glowworm gymnastics" which had attracted the attention and was now drawing the leisurely advance of the videttes,

whose jingling spurs betrayed their every movement.

The mountaineer and the young scout at his elbow had now their cue of action—they in the instant had mentally picked up the intent of Billy's artifice, and which apparently was leading to successful result.

Antonio had confidently expected a fight over possession of the horses, but with the odds as they were, the foxy trailer accepted with celerity the strategic advantage presented. The troopers, in pursuit of Billy's luminous wile, were now far enough away to make it an easy risk to secure their mounts. By cautious approach the giant guide and Henri averted possible stampede of the animals, which some startling move might have caused.

Only the presence of the Bangor boy was needed to start the getaway race. He relieved the anxious situation by bobbing up in the next minute or two, having planted the lantern, with open slide, on a convenient hillock and doing some lively crawling to avoid detection.

Antonio swung his bulk into the saddle, Billy gave his chum a leg up on the other horse and climbed behind him. With the tightening of the reins the willing steeds broke into a trot, and in response to urging increased speed to a swift gallop, the charging gait.

A stentorian command rang out—a command to halt. The troopers had found the bullseye, and at

the same time discovered that they had been hoaxed. By the hazy light in the sky they could discern the movement of the horses on the higher ground the animals were then crossing, and so aware that the trickster was making the best of the game he had played for their discomfiture.

Without firearms to raise alarm, the troopers followed the first futile admonition to stop with a great vocal uproar, demonstrating a lung power most remarkable.

The fugitives, however, were testing the mettle of some really first-class running stock, and with a clear lead of a mile or two had more to fear in front than from the rear.

"Seems that I'm in partnership with a very smooth young man," jollied Henri, in the first pause to give the double-laden horse a breathing spell.

"It has taken you a long time to find it out," was Billy's laughing reply. "But isn't this a proper trade, after all? They captured our aeroplane and now pay for it with horses."

"And with holsters full of revolvers and neat little carbines, too," interposed Antonio, turning in the saddle to have his say.

"We are loaded for bear, that's true," admitted the Bangor boy, glancing at the shooting equipment.

Though not disturbed by any sound of pursuit, the riders deemed it the wise policy to hurry along, in the hope of soon crossing the Italian frontier.

By the very nature of their journey they were far from sure of their exact whereabouts or what the sunrise might reveal.

As the riders sped on in the night, Billy spied in the black arch above a line of light like a shooting star or the short run of a comet, and Henri joined in prompt decision that an aeroplane was sailing up there. The boys watched the flying beam until it darted in flashing spirals downward and was lost to sight.

"They've landed," proclaimed the Bangor boy, "but just where on this dark map is beyond guessing."

"My impression is," asserted Henri, "that the come-down wasn't very far from where we started on the trip which resulted in the loss of our biplane."

"Wish you luck in the thought," said Billy, "for I think we are going right toward the spot where the craft appeared to fall."

The aeroplane incident went out of mind in the next half hour, succeeded by a new bid for attention that came with the dawn. The crack of rifles was heard somewhere on the other side of a knoll, up which the now weary steeds were slowly climbing. Antonio immediately leaped from the saddle, possessed himself of the carbine and revolvers attached thereto, and bidding the boys to stay where they were with the horses, began wary ascent of the remaining distance to the hilltop, with the purpose

of reconnoitering the area of disturbance and providing for timely retreat if emergency compelled.

Antonio remained but a very short while on the ridge before the anxiously waiting lads were startled by gunfire so near that the curling lift of smoke therefrom came out of the tall grass on the hillcrest hardly a hundred feet distant. The guide himself was doing some shooting, for just then Billy and Henri saw the long shape of their comrade spring from cover, in each hand a revolver, and blaze away, right and left, at something or other on the far side of the elevation. The young scouts needed no other summons to get to Antonio as fast as one horse could clamber and the other be pulled. The big fellow, having emptied every shooting-iron that he carried, hastened the reunion by meeting his upcoming comrades half-way on the hillside. He bounded onto the back of the led horse with all the ease belonging to half his weight, planted a rousing slap on the haunch of the animal ridden by the boys, wheeling both steeds in full gallop down the slope.

With many a piercing yell a score of recklessly racing cavalymen dashed over the ridge, with no reduction of speed on the incline, and in mad chase after the fast fleeing trio desperately endeavoring to evade capture. The fugitives heard often the zip of bullets over their heads, but it was soon apparent that the pursuers were not shooting to kill or to chance a maiming of the splendid horses belonging

to their own troop. Driving the human game back into the very nets through which they had wriggled by stratagem, the videttes were triumphantly confident of the final result.

Outspreading now like a fan, the troopers drew closer, yard by yard, to their quarry, and on the level, extending far and wide, the day bright and clear, there was no opportunity for any more artful dodging on the part of the clever scouts.

Antonio, grimly realizing that the finish was at hand, drew the curb on his foam-flecked horse, and turned at bay to meet the enemy, at the same time urging upon the boys to keep on until safely distant from the fight that was going to take place.

"Hand me the guns you have there," commanded the aroused Hercules, at the last stand, with the red gleam of blood lust in his eyes, "and then go—go, I say!"

Billy handed over the weapons from the boot and the saddle holsters but "go" he did not.

"Not a single step, and take that from me, chief!"

Henri echoed his chum—" 'Not a single step!' "

It was only a question of a minute or two now before the valiant little band would be overwhelmed by mere force of numbers, but the fighting giant in the forefront was prepared to make every second of sustained resistance count for something. The Austrians would find that clipping the wings of this eagle of the Alps was no gentle occupation.

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But this test of arms at close quarters was not to be in the making and Antonio was destined for other heroic endeavors in the mist-veiled future.

The Austrians, observing the now defiant attitude of the three comrades, came to a sudden halt themselves, within hailing distance, and with loud demand for instant surrender. Receiving no response, or sign of submission, the troopers were either about to shoot or ride down the disregarding scouts when there was an intervening check of an astounding character and from a source least expected.

Into the very midst of the horsemen formed for charge, it seemed like a meteor had fallen from the clear sky, a white dazzle and an earth-tearing explosion which scattered the cavalymen like chaff and laid low, in several instances, both horses and riders, hopelessly and inextricably combined in death struggle. The survivors, under ordinary circumstances, would, no doubt, have re-formed with military precision and gone forward to renew the combat with unabated vigor.

From whence, though, this lightning stroke? Not, indeed, had the destroying missile been cast by the silent three, who, a hundred feet away, were tensely awaiting the threatened onrush.

Again the falling terror, the gray and crimson puff, the burst of sound, the rain of far-flung debris. Not so accurately placed as the first but the lurid

reminder of an unseen foe that no blind marksman was at work.

"A war-plane!" The confused troopers had sighted the wasp that was stinging them, a tormentor they could not reach nor meet on equal terms.

True enough, a cruiser of the air hovered over the plain, winging low that the bomb operator might better display his skill in locating the moving targets below.

"The upside sailors that showed lights last night!" Billy was the exclamer this time.

"Saved us a lot of trouble," rejoiced Henri.

Antonio made no comment. He sat like a statue of bronze with carbine poised in sinewy hands and eyes fixed to the front.

Another fireball from above, another horse floundering on the earth and stunned rider menaced by pounding hoofs.

Bang! Bang! The videttes were shooting at the aircraft, a waste of ammunition, for the aviators were far beyond the short range of the carbines.

One of the troopers fired point blank at the big scout on the horse and the cone-shaped hat of the guide toppled from his head. Without changing weapon from hip position, Antonio returned the fire and emptied a saddle in the cavalry group.

This concluded the action. The mounted soldiers were in flight westward, some of the horses doubly burdened by the carrying of the wounded.

Apparently content with what had been accomplished, the aviators landed their machine on the plain, quite near to the spot which Antonio had selected for his last stand against the late pursuers.

The boys rode out to greet the airmen, who had rendered aid when aid was certainly of great need, and in the pilot the lads joyfully recognized one of the birdmen they had met at Ravenna after the long flight from Montenegro.

"So, signors, it is you that we have had a hand in rescuing," cried the Italian aviator, when the recognition had proved mutual. "It was a little fight between a few of our outposts and the horse-men we have just routed that caused our coming this way. What good fortune it has been."

"Now you're talking, you bully good fellow," warmly responded Billy. "Good fortune? It's as good as a million in gold. And how's our pals, Luigi and Moroni? It seems an age since we last saw them."

"They are at Grado. We were with them only yesterday. Their flight last night was along the coast; ours over this plain."

"Saw your lights all right," proclaimed the Bangor boy. "Say, chief, I want you to meet a couple of live ones from the flying corps. We owe them something for this morning's work."

Antonio gave the two aviators a grip that made

them wince. "But for you, signors," he gravely said, "it would have gone ill with us."

The airmen, with admiring glance at the stalwart proportions of the speaker, by their manner conveyed the belief that it would also have "gone ill" with some of the attacking party.

Given advices that about a mile distant there was running water, a mountain stream coursing into the plain, and of which refreshment the horses were in dire want, the three comrades headed that way, after watching the rise and departure of the aeroplane. They were so close to the friendly frontier now that crossing could be made in less than two hours, without haste.

In the late afternoon the blue expanse of the Adriatic was near to the vision of the riders, and that night they slept within the Italian lines.

Much to the disappointment of Antonio, his brother, Captain Vespia, had not yet returned from the Isonzo valley, and it was his will that with the next wagon train to that locality he would travel as a guard. The aviation corps claimed their own in Billy and Henri, and so again and for the time being the comrade trio reluctantly parted company.

Assigned again as operators of the seaplane in which they had formerly journeyed, Billy and Henri picked up a new acquaintance in the aerial service, Lorenzo Tenento, noted for dash and daring all along the coast, from Venice to Brindisi, and par-

ticularly expert in aircraft gunnery. On a special mission southward Lieutenant Tenento had elected to travel with the young scouts, and they were not at all averse to participating in any expedition with a live wire like the mentioned officer.

Luigi and Moroni both broadly smiled when the boys told of their new partnership, and cheerfully predicted a busy season for their young friends.

From the very outset Billy and Henri were strongly attracted by the magnetic personality of the crack gunner, a man of the world, brilliant, polished, of superior learning—and his eyes reflected “eternal grit.”

The boys, however, had no notion that the lieutenant would find more than passing interest in their company, or look beyond their recommendation for aviation merit or the actual proof of it. It was rather a “turn” for them, then, a certain incident that occurred on the day they were all to start on the coast trip for which sealed orders were in issue.

In overhauling the seaplane, in advance of the journey, Lieutenant Tenento being an onlooker, Billy had removed his jacket and thrown it on top of a locker. The ring, that mystery gift of the recluse of Goeritz, rolled out of the pocket in which it was stored, and twinkled on the deck of the aircraft.

The officer politely picked up the glistening circlet and was about to hand it to its owner, when he

noticed the emblem in the seal. To quick look of interrogation he immediately added the spoken query:

“How came you by this, my lad?”

CHAPTER XI.

SOME SECRET SIGNAL SERVICE.

BILLY turned quickly from his tinkering job in the seaplane rigging to meet the earnest regard of the questioner. "Oh, that ring," he answered; "why, it was given to me by a man whom I met for the first time, but who in a couple of hours made me feel as though I had known him all my life. Anyhow, what's peculiar about it?"

The lieutenant, with the jewel poised between thumb and forefinger, leaned toward the boy, and with manner much more confidential, further queried in lowered tone: "And of the truth, fealty and benevolence in this you know nothing?"

"All I know is that with the gift I also got a glad hand, good food and bed and heard some fine stories that still ring in my ears. My chum there had the same experience. And, then, Antonio was really responsible for the whole business."

"This Antonio?" The officer continued inquisition.

"A mountain man, sir," explained the Bangor boy, "the real thing, too, almost as tall as the mast of that schooner yonder. Vespia's his last name,

and he came into camp with us. He carries a ring like this."

Lieutenant Tenento nodded understandingly, and significantly remarked, in returning the ring to Billy: "It may serve you well sometime, and mayhap it was the protective purpose that prompted the master."

"That's what Antonio called him!" exclaimed the young scout. The officer smiled at the lad's memory flash, and as he left the dock for the headquarters building called back: "In the morning, signors, I may show you the smallest republic in the world."

"What's he talking about?" demanded Henri, emerging from the handbox engine room with a smudge on the end of his nose.

"About rings in particular and something, too, about a tiny nation exhibit he has up his sleeve for us. But I say, Buddy, have you noticed anything besides a flower picture on these decorations?" Billy was indulging in a critical inspection of the "master's" present about which their new friend had made so much ado.

Henri squinted an eye on the ring his chum was scrutinizing. "There is some sort of a do-funny in this little cluster of diamond chips that I hadn't seen before, but it doesn't make me any wiser."

"Nor me," admitted Billy. "I only know that the chief told me a few minutes ago that maybe these hoops would have extra value in case of fire or flood

or I can't say what as he didn't specify what sort of pinch."

"Well, Buddy, let's go ahead with the contract in hand," observed the Trouville lad; "we're working on a seaplane, not in a jewelry shop."

The gunnery expert gave Our Young Aeroplane Scouts the early morning hail, and did them the unusual honor of linking arms with them in their walk to the launching place of the seaplane. "We are brothers, in aviation," he gaily asserted, "and, I may say, of the ring. By the way, I believe you know this coast fairly well."

"'Fairly well' about describes it," stated Billy, "and we have had landings at some of the ports. And, anyway, sir, it's rather easy to follow a straight line."

"And if we crook it a trifle, my lad, I do not think it will worry you to any great extent," remarked the lieutenant as he stepped forward in the aircraft, his attention fixed upon the swivel gun in the bow. "A handy little barker, I'm sure," he commented. Then, abruptly: "Let's be moving!"

With the seaplane off the slide, the young pilot had the big bird aloft in no time, and Henri putting a lot of push in the motors the starting point faded to the rear like the back action of a spring bolt.

From the altitude maintained the aviators soon had view of Ravenna at the right, and, directly, Rimini, behind which, in the distance, mistily

loomed up a rocky hill three thousand feet above the coast level.

"San Marino over there, my lads," called the gunner from his forward perch. "Levers for descent, master pilot!"

Billy put the airship on the water surface with a long sweep downward, and accurately near shore.

"Is that your diamond-edition nation, sir?" asked the wheelman, as the seaplane gently rocked in the tide.

"According to advance notice," assented the lieutenant, "you are at the front door of the smallest republic in the world—to be historical, my lad, the last surviving representative of the Italian republics, and, to be exact, thirty-two square miles of nation."

"Anything special doing on that crag?" questioned Henri, who had begun to wonder what the lieutenant had in mind when he dropped down here.

"Perhaps I just wanted to give you a treat, my friends; something to write in your notebooks." The boys easily detected the raillery in the officer's remark. His next observations, however, were of more serious turn: "My commission for the present is patrol duty hereabouts. I am not concerned about the pocket itself, but if there be any hole in it I will be on hand as a mender."

The boys soon learned that San Marino city, named the same as the tiny independency, and on

the crest of the rocky hill, was accessible only by the road from Rimini.

If they had been left to themselves, it could be readily imagined that our boys would have taken a chance on climbing that road and socially mingling with the army of one thousand soldiers credited to the miniature nation. But the energetic Tenento, as Billy remarked, "kept their noses on the grindstone," by night and day survey over both sea and land, ranging for miles in all directions.

Wholly within Italian soil and under Italian rule, with the single curious exception of the one little spot on the craggy tract, the flyers gave most attention to the air paths, for if any Austrian invasion of this territory it would be by means of aeroplanes. The wireless had just conveyed to the coast points news of a bomb attack on Milan, that city of magnificent churches and museums, and the towns of Schio and Monza by aviators of the dual empire, and armored cruisers of the Italian aerial service were everywhere in force in the northeast to repel further expected bombardment from above.

It was not, however, until the seaplane crew had spent a week in their present station that Billy and Henri, one dark night, found relief from the tedium of sailing 'round and 'round with no apparent objective and nothing to interest when the scenery got too familiar.

Along about eleven o'clock, looking away from

the sea, and in the port next below Rimini, the Bangor boy was attracted by a queer manifestation high up in the black background—akin to the swinging of a censer filled with live coals of fire, and suspended between earth and sky.

“Have a look at that, pal!” exclaimed Billy over-shoulder to Henri, the latter taking it easy on a bundle of sailcloth, but on his feet in a jiffy when called as a witness by his chum.

“Luminous signal, I’m thinking,” announced the Trouville lad; “holds too much in one place for an aeroplane light.”

“Let the chief umpire the guessing contest,” suggested the discoverer of the phenomenon. “Where is he?”

“Where is who?” It was the lieutenant speaking, he having just emerged from the darkness farther down the wharf.

The high light in the west had for the moment vanished, but before Billy could offer eager apology and assert that really there had been something worth seeing, the fireball was working again like the pendulum of a clock.

“Name it, chief,” urged Billy, when assured that the officer had his eyes trained in the right direction.

“I’ll name a racehorse after you if we can get away in that machine in less than five minutes,” was the instant reply of the boss gunner.

All three made a rush for the seaplane, and it was a pretty piece of jockeying that the boys put up in the speedy start.

The lieutenant advised against flying directly at the suspected point. "Roundabout, my lad," he directed.

The young pilot, something of a wily scout himself, guided up-sea for a half mile before striking out for the high ground inland, and then curved to the rear of the crest where the mysterious beacon was yet in shining vibration.

No sooner, though, was the near presence of the big airship betrayed by the necessary hum and buzz of its motors than the luminous oscillation ceased, and the curtain of night closed in without a break.

The man in the bow seat of the craft opened now a silvery searchlight flood upon the scene, but the rock pinnacle beneath the glow was as bare as a billiard ball. No place, either, for a hydroplane to alight.

"We know the den of the fox, my lad," observed the lieutenant, facing the pilot that the latter might hear, "and that is an all sufficient reward for this night's work. Steer for the coast, and, mark you, the next time will be the charm."

Billy had no time to "think it over" just then. With some dark sailing before him, he must needs keep up a sharp lookout and perfect control of the

wheel. The gunner turned off the searchlight going back.

By noon of the following day had appeared aircraft company for the seaplane, two well-equipped war machines, manned by a quartette of soldier-aviators, happening along, very likely, in response to wireless summons.

At any rate, the lieutenant did not seem at all surprised at this addition to his operating force, and with the newcomers he immediately engaged in consultation. The officer subsequently informed Billy and Henri that the late arrivals would do most of the early flying inland during the coming night, "leaving us," he continued, smiling, "to watch the waves for awhile."

The boys noticed that when these aeroplanes did depart, under cover of dusk, it was singly they flew, widely apart, and as if in continuance of journey southward. Lieutenant Tenento, for some reason or other, known only to himself, and he seemed greatly amused at the performance, directed a series of short flights by the seaplane, paralleling the coast front, and with every light on the craft going at full tilt—repeating a favorite expression of Billy's, "lit up like a house afire."

After flying around in illuminated form for an hour or two, the Barry youth "caught onto" the lieutenant's maneuver—a now plain intent to impress upon every watcher, concealed or in the open, the

exact whereabouts of the big airship. Putting two and two together, as the saying is, Billy had also begun to shrewdly suspect why it was the two aeroplanes, quietly taking wing shortly before, were decidedly less desirous of attracting attention.

To complete the illusion of present indifference to inshore affairs, the pilot finally received the command to proceed directly out to sea, and Henri directed to contribute all the motive power he could get out of the machinery.

Twenty miles off-coast the only light in the seaplane was the slender beam on the dial of the compass.

The next move directed by the lieutenant was in the direction taken by the two aeroplanes early in the evening, without, however, approaching the coast until another score of miles had been traversed, when the landward order was given and the seaplane completed a half-circle on the way inland.

"Now, pilot, mind your eye in this going, for if you run into any hurrying shape up here, I want to be sure that it is not a friendly craft which we might cut in two with that steel prow of ours."

"No collisions for me, chief," replied Billy; "they too often work disaster both ways. But the seeing isn't everything extra when there is no shine to the fore, and if I make a blind hit it'll be the fault of this secret service business, not mine."

Henri, out of the verbal exchange between his

chum and the man in the bow, caught the word "collision," which caused him to remark, probably without being heard by the others, that "if there is any ramming to be done by this machine, hold the job until we get over the water again."

The seaplane had now reached the locality to which had been traced the night-before exhibit of the luminous signal, and even when Henri so eased the pressure of the motors that their hum no longer made hearing almost impossible outside the craft, the presence of any other aerial traveler was not in evidence, near or far, by kindred sound. If not flying, then, it must have been, in the thought of the seaplane crew, that the other aviators who had preceded them here were on the ground, had landed, indeed, to probe the mystery of the pinnacle by intimate inspection.

Precluded by the size and construction of the airship from seeking a resting place on the ground space here, the lieutenant was just about to use a searchlight as a revealer of conditions below when Henri, who had drawn himself up in the rigging for better outlook with the night glasses he had secured from the rear locker, heralded a new discovery by his cry of "glim to the left, Buddy, high; eyes up, chief!"

Both the pilot and the gunner at the fore were instantly alert and casting about with straining

vision to ascertain just what had excited their comrade.

The "glim" which Henri had sighted was in the north, direction so indicated by the seaplane compass, as the great mechanical bird again circled about the peak to retain headway, and the glowing disc held place at an altitude far above the loftiest reaches of the Apennines, that mountain chain which threads the middle of the Italian peninsula through its whole length to the Straits of Messina.

From this fire-ball emanated an ever changing color effect, and, too, it oddly zigzagged at different angles, never still for a minute.

Lieutenant Tenento, getting the bearings of the frisky "star" with rainbow attachment, lost no time in starting a signal service of his own, using one of the swinging lights of the seaplane in accurate imitation of the performance the aviators had witnessed when first attracted to the pinnacle operating point.

"I have not the least idea what I am telling the flying inquirers," observed the gunner, whose present occupation of signal juggling had brought him in closer touch with the pilot's perch, "but it would be a pity to disappoint on an occasion like this." Billy strongly suspected that the lieutenant was putting a chuckle into this line of talk.

As a bit of banter on his own part, the young pilot asked: "What's the matter with the regular force on this top?"

"I fear that Andrea and the other three of a kind with him have already caused a strike in the telegraph corps hereabouts. Perhaps——"

"You've started something, chief!" interrupted Billy, who, in bringing the seaplane about for another round, had a face in every direction.

CHAPTER XII.

'A DASH ACROSS THE SEA.'

THE faraway light had been multiplied a dozen times, and the added flashing orbits forming procession across the sky looked like a train of illuminated passenger coaches dashing through the night.

"A squadron on the wing," proclaimed Henri, "and out for trouble, I'll bet."

In the next round of the seaplane it was the seaward side that demanded its share of attention, two rockets in quick succession blazing a fiery trail aloft, and directly the dull boom of a distant explosion came to the hearing of the aviators.

The lieutenant now gave a signal of which he knew the meaning and which he was assured, by previous understanding, would be correctly interpreted by the men at whom it was aimed. The colors green, white and red were displayed in the seaplane headlight. From two points below the same colors came back in brilliant reflection, and the big airship had hardly turned, at sharp command, toward the coast when a pair of lesser craft leaped into the air and sped northward.

Billy had the word to get the seaplane back to

the water in short order, and he made every minute count for something in the way of penetrating space. To the surprise of the pilot he was instructed to alight in the harbor which had been the operating center for the airship from the time of first arrival.

The wireless station of the port was the magnet that was drawing the lieutenant into cover with all possible dispatch. The remote results of the exploit here were sure to be recorded by the conveying sound waves, and the chief mover was eager for advices as to the night's happenings elsewhere.

The boys themselves were, naturally, considering their active participation in the mysterious proceedings, also in high key of anticipation as to promised revelations in the matter of the inside workings of this secret service venture and what had been really accomplished thereby. It was a continuation of former and varied experiences, this mixing up with keen wits.

But the small hours of the morning passing, and no return of the lieutenant to enliven with his relation of interesting details, the young scouts in sheer weariness went sound asleep without the formality of even removing their shoes.

When the sleepers awakened it was long past the dawn of a beautiful day, under a typical Italian sky, and also affording the first view they had had of their strenuous comrade when he seemed to be taking the easy way of life.

"There is one coast raid by Austrian aviators which will never appear in later history," was the initial remark of the lieutenant; "that is," he added, "as far as this side of the river Po is concerned."

"Thanks to your warning," yawned Billy; "or, did you intend it for a warning?"

"Make it an easier question," laughed the gunner. "How did I know what the raiders expected, or what the fellow on the peak intended to do if he had a chance? I gave the signal for what it was worth."

"I have been wondering about the rockets at sea and the shot we heard," put in Henri.

"A Marconigram to one of the warships out there," explained the lieutenant, "that the air cruisers had changed their course, and the fireworks and gunfire combined to pass the prearranged word along to other vessels."

"You sure had a system laid out to beat the game," commented Billy. "One thing more—what became of the original signalman?"

Tenento shrugged his shoulders. "That is the one link necessary to complete the chain we forged," he said, with stern expression that boded ill to the offender, if ever apprehended.

"He's a deep file, all right," observed the Bangor boy, alluding to the officer, when he left the chums to enjoy breakfast together.

At the dock later on the lads had the unexpected

proffer to try out a brand-new biplane recently consigned to the port authorities by the Brindisi builders. "Go in peace for the once, my lads," cheerfully agreed the chief, when asked for his permission to make the test. "Built in Brindisi," he mused, referring to the new aircraft. "Perhaps our next journey will land us there."

That this probably meant a sea crossing from the mentioned Italian port to the fighting grounds of Albania the lieutenant did not then inform his young friends, for he had only intimation and no signed official orders as yet for this mission.

So Billy and Henri had a day before them, care-free, and a new flying machine with which to experiment. Sailing over some of the side branches of the Apennines the young aviators viewed a seemingly endless succession of wooded hills, olive-clad slopes and fertile valleys. In the course of flight, and when the biplane passed over the elevated city of San Marino, the pilot was tempted more than once to drop into the center of the little republic to see, in the language of the Bangor boy himself, "just how they ran things." But, though as usual young Barry "had his nerve with him," he finally took it for granted, without personal investigation, that the 10,000 inhabitants were well governed.

A special inducement, also, to forego all stops at this time was the sight of another aeroplane coming down on the wind from the north and onrushing

toward the coast. When the arriving craft poised for a downshoot it was immediately over the port from which the boys had flown at an earlier hour.

"We'll go back, Buddy, and find out what the breeze brought in," proposed Billy, getting the biplane in line for the home run.

It was Andrea, one of the chief movers with Lieutenant Tenento in breaking up the signal conspiracy, and his flying partner who had just flown in. The first named aviator was using some rapid Italian in telling the lieutenant what happened since he started north in pursuit of retiring air fleet of the Austrians. Billy and Henri landed in time to hear some of the relation, and the foreign words coming too fast for the understanding of the Bangor boy, he called on his chum to interpret. "He says, in his own way," explained Henri, "that the enemy bird-men got what Paddy gave the drum."

The most important issue, however, of Andrea's hasty trip down from Grado was the delivery to the lieutenant of an order which resulted in prompt action on the part of the recipient of the communication in making ready for a change of base. The young scouts transferred from biplane to seaplane with no more time intervening than was required to get through a quick lunch. In flight directly south the seaplane was compelled to "hump itself" to keep ahead of the racing machine driven by Andrea, which followed the bigger craft some

twenty miles before offshooting into the hill country back of the coast.

By the direction taken and in memory of a previous remark of the lieutenant, the boys had no doubt as to the point for which the airship was then headed. Further than that they were not advised, not even primed for guessing.

Off the fortified city and that important seaport, Brindisi, once great naval station of the ancient Romans, the hydroplane settled for the night in an excellent harbor, and the aviators went ashore for brief acquaintance with good bed and board. "Brief" is the word, for the stay was of but few hours' duration.

Across the Adriatic, Italy mixed in the Balkan fight, determined not to give up Albania, a region of West European Turkey between the sea, Greece, Macedonia and Montenegro. The morning brought continuing advices of the greatest aerial activity of Austrian flying squadrons since the beginning of the war, demonstrated in raids on the Albanian ports of Durazzo and Valona. Lieutenant Tenento was chafing under some restraint, of which he did not confide in the boys, during the early part of the day. At noon there was sudden relief of the restless officer's impatience, and he then advised his young companions without reserve of the opportunity at hand to get into adventure that had an edge on it. The speaker kept an eye on the boys, as if to gauge

their inclination in regard to the proposed adventure, but not a sign of the "white feather" did he see. "It's a go then, my lads, and forthwith!"

Billy and Henri, on the way to the seaplane berth, returned a confidence of their own to the gallant comrade and leader. They told him of their self-conducted trip to Montenegro and their experience there. It was not a rebuke that the confessing youths received from the listener. The lieutenant indulged in a hearty laugh, vigorously slapped the youngsters between the shoulders and declared that they "were after his own heart. But," he added, in mock-serious tone, "for the sake of discipline, don't do it again."

This was about the last of the lighter vein talk in connection with the seaplane voyage to the Albanian coast. About coming events there would be no cluster of smiles. Before the airship was half-way across the Adriatic, the Italians and the Albanian forces under Essad Pasha were fighting like tigers with the Austrians for the possession of the dilapidated town of Durazzo.

The lieutenant planned to get in touch with the troops of his countrymen as soon as possible, but with all the repute for reckless daring charged to him, it was no part of his design to jump into the fire blindfolded. The recent affair of the baffled coast raiders was sufficient of itself to firmly establish the fact that the doughty officer was as much

and even more of a strategist than he was of the headlong fighting type when it came to the point of strategy being the best policy.

The rugged coast the aviators were approaching was admirably adapted to the dodging process by a hydroplane, innumerable juttings and inlets, coves and rock curlycues partly submerged. Then, too, retreat to the open sea was always an assurance of getaway chance for a high-power air-boat. As a measure of precaution, the seaplane was guided to the water area some distance above the port centers where the belligerents were then locking horns.

"We will drop down by degrees," grimly observed the man behind the swivel gun, which "handy barker," as the observer called it, was in readiness to blow a hole in the first hostile craft of less size than a battleship which might venture an attack.

Henri, in addition to keeping a close watch on the motive power, had also the assigned duty of running up the colors on the rigging in event of hail from assured friend in aeroplane or aboard the sea-running destroyers identified with the Italian encampments. For such the seaplane crew were constantly on the lookout, and intending to join the friendly aerial contingent the moment any chance of so doing presented itself.

To conserve the petrol supply in the hydroplane tanks, a most essential care, the craft was put to its floats many times, the sea, happily for the success

of the fuel-saving method, being then in a state of unruffled calm.

By high flight occasionally the aviators soon located the Italian land positions, and the lieutenant finally decided to get within hailing distance of the encampments at Valona. This was the venture that brought the seaplane into actual contact with the war doings in that locality. While the big airship was hovering offshore, probably a mile distant from the haven sought by its crew, there could be plainly heard a series of explosions, and a few seconds later, by nearer approach, the observer in the bow of the in-driving craft caught sight of several aeroplanes darting about over the port.

"They're shelling the camps!" This outcry of the gunner reached a still higher note in the succeeding shout: "One of them is down!"

Billy did not await command to hold the steel beak of the mighty machine he was guiding straight as a die in forward movement. The Austrian aeroplane, with a hot shot in its motor, had fluttered like a wounded bird down to the sea, followed by the swoop of its companion planes to the aid of the two aviators in the crippled craft.

Just as the assisting machine was making off with the rescued airmen two Italian destroyers dashed full speed through the water in vain attempt to make a capture.

Lieutenant Tenento fired twice at the fleeing avia-

tors, but the range was too much for the seaplane gun, and both shots were wasted.

The end desired, however, had its realization in this stirring incident—the airship was in harbor and its occupants within the Italian lines. Reinforcements had recently landed here and strongly intrenched in anticipation of Austro-Bulgarian attack. Military activity was everywhere in evidence when the lieutenant and the young scouts went ashore. The chief, after a visit to headquarters, had another mission to serve, and again the boys listened to the familiar word—“move.”

Into Durazzo bay the next morning Billy guided the seaplane, not long before the finishing investment of this port by the Austrians, and the withdrawal of the Italian brigade, the Serbian, Montenegrin and Albanian troops. The entire outer girdle of the Durazzo defenses had even then been taken by the enemy.

Billy and Henri, despite the disturbed conditions, had a couple of hours to look over the town, which was full of ancient ruins, and mingle with a medley of forces the like of which the young campaigners had never previously encountered in their varied experiences throughout the war zones. Particularly were the lads interested in the peculiar Albanians, the warrior race of the mountains, so frank to a friend and so vindictive to an enemy.

The lieutenant, who had been specially charged

with a message to the Italian brigade commander, interrupted the attempted conversation of Billy with one of the fierce mountaineers to instruct the young scouts that their next important duty was to get a supply of petrol from one of the troop ships and prepare the seaplane for immediate departure. "Any moment," he said, "this place may become too hot to hold us."

With everything ready then for hasty flight the pilot and his chum waited in the airship for the coming of their chief and word to break away.

CHAPTER XIII.

THROUGH A HOLE IN THE WALL.

It was a dragging hour, and then twice that waiting period, with no sight of the lieutenant. The young aviators in the seaplane had begun to think that they might as well have been allowed to continue shore liberty if it was going to take all this time for the Austrians to get into the town. In the action roundabout of the hasty embarking of troops the boys could have no part. They had been told to "sit tight," and were doing it, though it was a wearing assignment under the circumstances.

When the last resisting inner positions should be penetrated by the enemy vanguards, Billy and Henri, with all the clearing out they had seen, imagined and then anxiously reflected upon the possibility of their chief and comrade being caught, single-handed, by the besiegers.

Gun-fire, inshore, had practically ceased, and the watchers aboard the craft lying close to the rim of the bay were passing the limit of patience.

"Something's happened to the boss!" Billy was quite emphatic in this pronouncement. "I'm going

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to hike around a bit and see if I can find him. You keep an eye on the ship, Buddy."

"Not I," objected Henri. "If you go, I'll not be far behind. There's a piece of rope that'll hold the old craft all right."

"Get the chief's revolvers out of the locker," suggested the Bangor boy to his chum, who was then engaged in hitching the hydroplane to a stake he had driven deep in the soil at the water's edge. "He may want them, if he is not already down and out."

The young scouts started out boldly enough, but caution was quickly impressed by their first glimpsing of Austrian uniforms just beyond the borders of the town. There was plenty of cover near at hand, and the boys found concealment behind the crumbling walls of an old-time fortress, from where they had a good view of the long, narrow and crooked street that extended from the water front and connected with the rocky road running east to Sasso Blanco, the scene of one of the fierce engagements which had opened the way for the enemy to Durazzo.

"What gets me," observed Billy, "is the failure of the chief to show up when everything points to a do nothing job here now. We both know he isn't in the habit of shuffling when it's time to hustle. And I know he'd never shake us, if he could help it."

"No use standing here that I can see," said Henri.

"Let's dodge across this alley to that bunch of buildings where the officers stayed. Nobody there yet to put the clamps on us."

No sooner had the boys dodged into the apparently deserted structures than they dodged out again, on the opposite side, and sought refuge behind the tip-up bed of an unwieldy two-wheel cart backed into a corner of a courtyard.

Through an east window Henri had noted the approach of a number of soldiers in Austrian uniform, and the boy's heart seemed to leap in his throat when he also set eyes upon the man in different attire who marched between two broad-shouldered leaders. It was Lieutenant Tenento, this captive!

Billy got a warning prod from his chum but no chance for a look at the oncoming squad, so speedy was the exit of the lads through the side door into the courtyard outside. Hardly, though, had the youths gained their new hiding place when Henri put the word in the near ear of his pal that the chief was close by and a prisoner.

The Bangor boy shut his teeth hard to keep from saying "Gee" out loud.

In the meantime the soldiers were raising echoes from the stone floors inside the main building of the cluster around the courtyard.

Smuggled in the rear of their solid wooden screen, the young scouts racked their brains for some

scheme whereby they could, without risking sure discovery, apprise the lieutenant of their presence—either that or start some diversion which might result in the getaway of all three before the main body of troops filled up the town and cut off all avenues of escape.

It would have been tolerably easy for the boys, at the time and with nightfall coming on apace, to make a stealthy circuit to the old stone pile across the street, and thence to the water front, under cover nearly all the way. Once in the seaplane, nothing less speedy than a cyclone could catch them. But the idea of deserting the friend in custody had never a second's consideration with the pair behind the cart.

Darkness came as a welcome visitant, and with it the opportunity for Billy and Henri to leave, unobserved, their hiding place and try for a peep at the doings inside the nearby building, through the cracked walls of which many lines of light were shining. The Austrians had gathered some of the food and fuel leavings of the departed troops and were making the best of the newly possessed shelter.

The Bangor boy, after several attempts to locate a fissure along the wall that would increase the scope of vision sufficiently to take in the space about the hearthstone at the rear of the large room, found at last, by feeling, a loose inset in the cobbled exterior which moved slightly when thumb pressure was

brought to bear upon it. Billy did not play a trick on himself by pushing the wavering stone, for if it dropped inside, no telling the noise or the attention it might attract. That useful pocket-knife of Henri's he was very softly urged to produce, and with the steel point thereof, aided by a double set of finger-nails, the boys neatly created a hole in the wall without muss or fluster.

With both eyes in this aperture Billy had full and free view of the interior scene and the assemblage entire. The lieutenant was standing with his back to the fire, and surrounded by troopers in various attitudes of ease-taking, watching with lazy interest the outlaying by several more active comrades, on a roughly constructed table, of the edible contents of a number of haversacks.

The look-in point was at the dark end of the enclosure, and its remoteness from the flame-lit circle precluded possibility of detection, by chance glance, of the peering youths, taking turn-about in framing their faces in the cut-out of the wall.

Directly, and after eating, two of the soldiers adjusted their equipment of weapons, belted on side-arms and shouldered rifles, preparing, apparently, for sentry duty outside. The balance of the squad, with one exception, who perched on a stool before the fire, lighting and vigorously smoking a big bowled pipe, rolled themselves in their blankets and went to sleep.

Lieutenant Tenento drew up a bench to the chimney-corner, seated himself thereon, and with head in hands seemed lost in contemplation of the glowing coals in the cavernous depths of the fireplace.

In leaning forward to make a chin-rest of his crossed hands in the opening through which he was watching these proceedings, Billy dislodged another block in the wall, and which tumbled with a scattering of mortar particles on the stone floor inside.

With hasty withdrawal of face and hands the young scout got a snap-shot look at the infantryman on guard in the room, and saw that soldier spring to his feet, alert and listening.

Both of the boys flattened full length on the ground, Henri in imitation of his chum, when the latter's action indicated that he had sighted some sort of scaremark.

Billy was just counting it a sure thing that the minutes of free agency of his pal and himself were numbered when the stillness of the night and deserted town was suddenly disturbed by the rhythmic tread of marching regiments and attendant noises of shifting accoutrements and mingling of hoarse commands.

"The jig's up!" exclaimed Billy, half aloud, with the words resuming upright position, his face again on a level with the break in the wall. "Geeminy, pal," he immediately added, "the whole blessed lot that were in there have gone out to meet the rest

of the army. The room's empty, save for the chief!"

"Give him the whistle!" urged Henri.

The Bangor boy piped a low-pitched trill through the opening and repeated the signal after getting his head in the vacant space. The lieutenant, who was again standing in front of the fire, made hasty stride in the direction of the sound. It was a call that had been passed before between the three aviators during their night flutterings near Rimini.

"Give us a heave here, boss. Quick!" Billy, in his excitement, had passed the whispering stage, and the lieutenant heard the invitation as it was given, with startling distinctness.

There was no time to spare. It was the last desperate chance to escape together, and the boys did not propose to escape any other way than united.

If two of the stone blocks had come out, with no great effort of pushing and pulling, there was no reason why others could resist additional forcing. The lieutenant, realizing what was needed, grabbed a rifle from the collection the late sleepers had stacked and vigorously applied the butt of the weapon against the yielding masonry. The boys swallowed a lot of mortar dust in their panting efforts to assist in enlarging the aperture and each avoided by luck alone a mashed foot when three or four of the solid cubes were precipitated at once into the courtyard.

But the hole was big enough then for the lieuten-

ant to squirm through; he was out, and the whole thing accomplished in less than two minutes.

"A tight squeeze, that," muttered the sorely scraped officer as he scrambled to his feet, "but the fix we are in yet is not very loose, it appears to me, and no use to complain of what has already happened."

Around in front of the building the street resounded with the thud of grounded arms, and a babel of voices further established the immediate presence of a large body of troops.

The trio at the rear did not tarry to hear any more, they scurried to the corner where the cart afforded climbing aid and got out of the yard enclosure in bouncing-board style. So dark was the space into which the fugitives leaped that Billy, in the lead, ran slam-bang into one of the many tumble-down building relics which abounded in the vicinity.

"Cracked every bone in my body," growled young Barry, who, however, kept stumbling along, with no intention of halting to receive first aid at the hands of his companions, themselves having cause to complain of many knocks and bruises.

The sprinters, running blindly, were convinced that the sea-front had not yet been hemmed across by military cordons, and from there, after all, was extended the only promise of a successful evasion of pursuit. To break for the open in any direction meant encounter with the hostile forces which had

encircled by land the late provisional capital of Albania.

Getting to that flying machine in the harbor was the thought paramount, and the slightest delay would "spoil the broth." Each racing minute the comrades expected to hear the shouts that would surely be raised when the absence of the lieutenant was discovered and the method of exit revealed.

The anticipated outbreak was none the less vociferous because it did not come sooner, but with the clamor was mingled encouragement for the little party of speeders. They could hear the beating of the waves on the rock borders of the harbor.

Henri took on the role of pathfinder. He was the last one out of the seaplane, and charged with the tie-up of the craft. It was no daytime contract, however, and a slower process to find without seeing.

While the Trouville lad was casting about for the resting place of the airship, the lieutenant and Billy awaited in suspense the choice of chance—the coming of the pursuers or the glad summons of their comrade from out of the darkness.

From the sounds up the long street and the weaving in and out of many lights, something would have to show in counter-play within the next few minutes or mark a losing game against the waiting aviators.

Billy was the possessor of the two revolvers belonging to the lieutenant, which the latter had left in the seaplane locker, Henri having silently passed

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the weapon that he had been carrying to his chum; as the pair separated a minute or two previously.

Into the hands of the officer at his side the Bangor boy pressed one of the guns, and if it came to shooting the pair were ready to return the fire.

A whistle, the thrilling signal of the airmen, and of happy meaning. Henri had found the seaplane!

The two on the lookout deserted their posts with scant observance of dignity, a sort of hop, skip and jump manner of leaving, and responded to the lure of the whistler, whom they discovered working in the power section of the airship by the one light he had presumed to turn on.

As the hydroplane splashed into the bay for the rise, the near coast line was spangled with flares, and a score or more of rifles blazed like a bunch of giant firecrackers touched off at the same time. But all of the lead went wild and the winged target was off and away without a puncture.

Offshore flying, however, at this particular juncture began to present some unforeseen difficulties, created by an expanding disposition on the part of the air currents to become obstreperous, and the responding action of the seaplane more and more inclined to be unruly.

The extended period of calm in these parts was due for a change, and the transformation of the elements occurred precisely at the wrong time for the voyagers forced to fly. They could not go back,

and it appeared as though they could not go forward.

Like a sailor lashed to the wheel of an old-fashioned three-master, water and wind-swept, Billy leaned to the steering apparatus of the airship, slipping an eccentric with every sweep of erratic flight, and with need of every ounce of elbow-grease in his well-muscled arms. Not a wet weather disturbance was this—just wind, and more than a plenty of it. The waves, running high and white-capped, offered no inducement for repose. To try for ascent to greater altitude, seeking ventilation less fierce, was in the mind of the pilot, but the gale made of any vertical movement a hazardous proposition.

To evade the cross-currents, then, and to get the big blow behind the craft was the combination attempt adopted by the wheelman. The result of these maneuvers had yet to be developed, falling short of the opportune period to do something else presented in a timely discovery by the man in the bow.

“Island to the fore!”

The words were megaphoned through the hollow of the gunner’s joined hands.

CHAPTER XIV.

WARNED BY SEA FOWL.

THE land ahead, as now observed by the pilot, was a triangular strip of rock formation, tapering at the angles to long points of in-drifted sand, over which the waves ever and anon rolled and foamed. Billy figured at a glance that the seaplane dip would be attended by a shower-bath for all concerned, but in close proximity to the soft sides of any of the angles the craft could be hauled out of the turbulent waters without a smash-up, providing, of course, that drowning did not first overtake the haulers.

There was no discount on the fact, however, that as far as the eye could reach this little solid spot below presented the only sustaining elevation above the billows, not considering the faint gray line of the Balkan Peninsula coast, far distant to the west.

Billy well knew that if he missed the island by overshooting, it was ten chances to one against tacking in the prevailing gusts, rampant and no longer to be resisted by the careening craft. The lieutenant loudly advised instant action, and Henri added his vehement cry of "now or never."

Then the dive and impact with the tumultuous

tide, the airship momentarily half submerged, but held to balance by the buoyancy of its floats. Assisted by the force of the waves overleaping the shoal, the seaplane was driven, sidewise, onto the sand, and the aviators completed the saving job by dragging the craft out of reach of the outgoing sweep of water. It was an exhausting task, and the trio of strenuous workers, wet to the skin, were content to celebrate their safe landing by preempting a dry place under the nearest rock ledge, where the wind could not reach them.

"That certainly is a twister upstairs to-day," ruefully remarked Billy, rubbing aching wrists, reacting from holding strain.

"I thought more than once," put in Henri, "that we were going by the 'board,' but this good old pal of mine knew too many tricks of the trade to fall down."

The Bangor boy aimed a playful kick at his chum in repudiation of the compliment. "All I did," he said, "was to hold her straight and trust to luck. Come to think of it," continued young Barry, "the chief hasn't told us yet how he got in limbo."

The lieutenant, who had just completed inspection of the seaplane lockers to ascertain the water damage to the cartridges and provisions, first proclaimed that the stored stuff was all right before he indulged in back-tracking.

"Not much of a story, my lads," he remarked; "I

went out to the second line of entrenchments, was tempted to serve an abandoned gun there, as a finishing touch of occupation, fully intending to join you when the few remaining rounds of ammunition were gone. But I was too much of a straggler, and though doing a bit of hand-to-hand fighting, the Austrian advance guard got me. You were the fellows who did all the rest."

"The worry with us, sir, was all before we had assurance that you were still in the flesh," declared Billy. "Everything afterwards went as a matter of course."

"What you did, my friends, will not soon be forgotten by me," solemnly asserted the officer.

The wind gave no sign of subsidence; indeed, it continued in hurricane volume and velocity, "blowing great guns," in the language of the jolly tar.

"I don't know what the climate is going to produce," said Henri, "but it seems to me that as long as we're stuck here it wouldn't be a bad idea to look over the ground and see if there isn't a snugger spot than this on the island for a bivouac."

"Look it over, my lads," advised the lieutenant, "you've got a mile of space from which to pick. I'll fasten the tarpaulin over the plane while I'm waiting for you to whistle or return."

Pulling their caps down to their ears and with jackets closely buttoned the young explorers braced their way up the gale-exposed angle, several times

compelled to rest on hands and knees to preserve any sort of equilibrium.

They found easier going, however, in the rock lanes, some of the sheltering boulders rising to a height of twenty or thirty feet.

In the hollowed base of one of these big stones the boys discovered traces of fire-building, and evidently not of any remote date in the past. Further close investigation developed also the existence there of a cache, a place of concealment of food for future use.

"The first quiet day to come," observed Henri, "we're likely to have company."

"Make a memorandum, Buddy, that the first quiet moment that shows up it's just three that I know of who won't be here." Billy evidently did not propose to claim the island as a residence. He amended his remark by saying: "No use, though, of covering any more territory. This looks good enough to me. Go after the chief."

While Henri went back to the head of the shoal to summon the lieutenant, Billy started a fire under the rock, and by the time his companions arrived with the wherewith for a meal there was a bed of live coals on which to boil the coffee.

When the boys pointed out to the chief the hidden store of food, the officer laughingly said that this was "real hospitality to so provide for stran-

gers. I fancy, though," he added, "that it is a relay point for some seagoers who travel light."

The cheery blaze soon absorbed all the dampness in the blankets which Henri had brought up from the seaplane, and sheltered from the cyclonic blasts by the encircling and overhanging rocks, the travelers passed a fairly comfortable night.

It was no renewed demonstration on the part of the wind that awakened the sleepers. The disturbance was an outburst of squawking, quacking and screeching, of shrilling discord sufficient to open the eyes of a mummy. Sea fowl, in multiplied hundreds, were giving an early morning concert on the sand-spits, rejoicing, perhaps, that the gale was dead and the sun very much alive at this 5 a. m.

"Gee," yawned Billy, "I have just broken away from a dream that had me locked in the bird house at the zoo with everything in feathers on a strike."

The tone and topic of the Bangor boy's lament immensely amused his comrades, and so pronounced was their merriment that the zoo dreamer warned them to quit on the grounds that they "who laugh before breakfast will cry before night."

Within the very next hour the little party owed to these same noisy sea fowl a timely warning that enabled the trio to anticipate the incoming of not only a submarine but, capping the climax for such a brief period, two seaplanes sporting, of a cer-

tainty hereabouts, the wrong colors to suit the present sojourners on the island.

Billy, acting as cook, had just handed out a second round of rations to his heartily hungry comrades and smilingly helped himself, when all of a sudden the air was literally alive with the feathered tribe, frightened by a then unknown cause from their feeding grounds and resenting such invasion by clamorous protest.

"Something's passed 'em a scare," cried Henri, jumping up and making a bee-line for a table-shaped rock overlooking the low-lying angle from where the birds seemed to be chiefly coming.

One glance seaward sufficed as an inducement to the Trouville lad to desert the elevated perch which he had gained by some expert climbing.

"Sub. out there, sure's you're born!" he exclaimed. "Deck showing and some of the crew, too."

"Say, fellows, try an eye higher up!" Billy was having his turn as an excitement producer. Above the sunlit and now placid sea were flying, and in the distance and altitude no larger than gulls, an aircraft pair, headed directly for the island.

"'It never rains but it pours,'" this proverb uttered by the lieutenant, who had been receiving a lot of information to be crowded into the time space of a minute or two.

"We, us and company for some rapid thinking,"

suggested the Bangor boy; "with all that crowd ashore the scrap would be too one-sided."

The chief's rapid thinking took the form of a quickstep towards the shoal where the airship was resting.

Billy and Henri accepted the silent decision as final, and measured stride with their leader. In leaving the shelter of enclosing rock formation, it developed that in the open and for a distance of fifty yards or more the every movement of the aviators could be plainly seen from the conning tower of the submarine, and a pretty pick for the gun that would unfold from the back of the underwater craft.

Up to the moment, however, the submarinists were apparently unaware that there was any material for a shooting-match so handy, and were either lying in for repairs or preparing to operate somewhere in conjunction with the approaching aircraft.

That some of the deckmen had not before discovered the seaplane could be probably explained by the fact that the covering tarpaulin and the sand on the shoal were nearly of a color.

The clever plan of the lieutenant when he had sized up the situation was simply not to show on the exposed level until it was necessary to get the seaplane in action. But how was he to conjure for such a performance?

On the far side of the tapering strip, and within

the shield of the rugged lines, the sea deeply encroached, and here it was that the veteran scout began to divest himself of all superfluous weight—boots, cartridge belt and even his precious pistols—all went into the discard. The boys contributed their shoes in trimming for what they now foresaw was a swim.

From a jutting rock the wily workers lowered themselves into the tide, and with never a splash struck out by under-stroke to cover the distance intervening between them and the coveted position alongside the flying machine.

It must be appreciated that in these endeavors the three scouts had moved with all the celerity of firemen at the first sound of the gong. It was not then so much the proximity of the submarine that forced the hustle as it was the momentarily expected arrival of the winged craft which Billy had sighted in the faraway ether, assuring a searching combination that could hardly fail to run into the airship and, eventually, find the parties who had manned it. Where, though, the undersea boat was to be reckoned with was in the crucial period of getting the airship under way.

As the last resort of concealment, on nearing the flat surface and tip of the angle the swimmers made a long dive, and when next their heads were above water it was make or break in the supreme

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effort to arise and fly before the U-boat operators turned loose a destroying fusillade.

The lieutenant's first step on the sand was instantly succeeded by a strong pull at the tarpaulin covering of the hydroplane, and a yank that cleared the craft of the obstructing canvas in the twinkling of an eye.

As the shoulder force from behind the airship gave it the desired sliding impetus into the sea, Henri climbed like a cat into the motor section, Billy swung a leg through the rigging and the chief got footing inside by the spring of an acrobat.

There was outcry of astonishment from the submarine bridge, a still louder command to "hold or I'll blow you out of the water," and which threat was impressed by the detonation of the hastily aimed deck gun.

But the airship was now pulsating with mechanical life and the lifting levers in action. In addition, the veteran gunner, Tenento, no longer purposed to do all the dodging, and he sent a chunk of lead from the revolving "barker" behind which he was crouching that clipped the sea surface within a few feet of the whaleback.

Billy, by this time, had maneuvered the seaplane to a thousand-foot altitude and doing a straight-away pace of a mile a minute. It was none too soon, this ascent and onrush forward, for the other aircraft had reached and passed over the center of

the island, by their neglect to attempt landing removing all doubt as to intention of pursuit.

The exchange of gunfire between the fleeing airship and the submarine had been seen, if not heard, by the approaching aviators, advance notice to hurry which brought into play all the motive power of the Austrian machines. Our boys and the lieutenant, however, had already a half-mile the best of it, and with driving mechanism of the most improved type such lead could, save accident, be rated as very near saving grace.

True it was that the three aviators were still in territory where at any moment they might be aerially assailed from most any direction, and friendly shore no less distant than across a wide stretch of water, yet despairing resignation had no place in these hearts courageous. They had all in their time been too often between the frying pan and the fire to flunk at shadows.

For some reason or other the chasers ceased to hang on more than eight or ten miles, and it may have been, after all, of more than trifling disappointment to the lieutenant that one at least of the pursuing planes did not get near enough for him to use some of the cartridges he had laid out for ready insertion into the swivel cannon.

With no other menace now in the limit of vision, it was deemed expedient by the aviators to essay a new tack, in the hope of hitting the trail of some

of the Italian troop-ships before the petrol supply of the seaplane was exhausted.

The recent big blow had sadly interfered with the original plan of sailing directly in homeward course right from the first jump out of Durazzo harbor. To the gale the airmen owed not only another perilous adventure but a hundred miles or so the wrong way.

Wheeling into direction southwest the seaplane had proceeded some twenty miles, when the attention of the operators was drawn to a floating large object in the sea at the right of the course they were following.

The lieutenant immediately put the mark of interest under inspection through the binocle, with which powerful glass he had been every now and then surveying the waste of waters in search of the sought-for troopships.

"It's a good-sized boat," he cried, "but minus mast or funnel. Looks like a derelict, my lads."

"Caught in the hurricane that hit us; eh, chief?" The guess and question were Billy's.

"Isn't anything like a submarine, that's sure," proclaimed Henri, who was using the field-glasses belonging to his end of the plane.

The young pilot, with lingering suspicion of most everything of sudden showing in these parts, sent the airship on upshoot before making a sail over and

around the sluggishly moving mass in the water below.

For all of his caution Billy was of too inquisitive temperament to quit the locality with curiosity unsatisfied, and in the motor section of the seaplane there was another just like him.

Convinced by nearer view that the wallowing hulk was the partial wreck of a clean-built merchantman of goodly tonnage, apparently abandoned and nothing to indicate a hidden sting for venturesome boarders, the wheelman eased the flying machine with slow, spiral descent into the tide alongside of the craft adrift.

Henri, swinging near to the bow of the stricken ship, swarmed up the forechains with all the agility of a monkey, and from the littered deck laughingly hailed his comrades gazing upward through the seaplane rigging.

"Hold hard and I'll heave you a rope," he shouted.

CHAPTER XV.

BILLY BARRY'S GAME OF BLUFF.

"Stow the cord, pal," bantered Billy; "you're not the only squirrel in this neck of the woods."

The lieutenant, however, caught the rope-end which Henri cast from above, using it in attachment to the seaplane, so as to give free play to the flying machine on floats and prevent grinding against the sheathing of the derelict.

With this precaution the chief followed the Bangor boy aboard the wreck. "The wind was not the first thing that hit this boat," commented the veteran after comprehensive glance about.

To his practiced eye there was evidence a-plenty that the ship had been under fire as well as in contact with the other kind of blast. Further investigation produced another declaration from the inspecting officer: "I have it, my lads; this craft has had a taste of aerial bombs, its crew driven to the small boats by an attack they could not resist; the big blow came along, spoiled the game for the flyers and whirled away their prize. That's my solution, for want of better."

"Sounds all right to me," sagely observed Billy.

"All the wreckage, dents, holes and powder marks are on the topside. The guns of a cruiser would have peppered occasionally into the hull, and, anyway, could never plug straight down through the deck."

"Only way to account for the absence of the crew that I can see," was the opinion advanced by Henri. "But," he continued, "whichever or whatever way it happened, we're in sole command of the barque, and with roving commission to find out if there's anything in the hold besides water."

"Boots or shoes, for instance," suggested the lieutenant, reminding every one of the trio that they were barefooted.

"Lucky strike for a starter," agreed the Bangor boy.

His chum had quit the conversation and was forcing a wedged door in the half-dismantled cabin forward.

"Hi, there, pards," he called, reappearing after a short stay in the enclosure; "you're dead certain for an outfit for your feet, and all over, for that matter."

The announcer was immediately joined by his comrades, eager to have a look-in for themselves. Clothing there was in pegged array and of variety, oil-skins, pea-jackets, and other nautical attire, with a jumbled display of boots, rubber and leather, and shoes of all sorts and sizes. The several chests in

the cabin had evidently had hasty overhauling, and their contents scattered haphazard about the floor.

"Regular rummage sale you've started here, old top," joked Billy, then proceeding to fit his feet from the shoe collection, the lieutenant selecting a particularly fancy pair of boots, which he named "the captain's best." As for the log-book and the ship's papers not a trace rewarded the thorough search which the aviators instituted in every nook and corner, crack and cranny of the deck-house.

"Passed us a puzzle," reflectively observed the boss gunner. "That's the custom, though, I presume, with shipmasters on rare occasions like this. They take the records along as evidence of good faith. I am thinking, however, that the cargo is still below, and we may be able to tell something from the showing there."

"Let's go down, then," urged Henri; "there's a box of matches on the shelf that will light us on our way."

The lieutenant shook his head in dissent. "Get that lantern over there. No open burners on a hunt like this. These are days of munitions carrying, and when we go up I prefer that it be in a seaplane."

The officer firmly insisted that he should go first in the venture of descent into the vessel's interior, and go first he did, with the lantern's flame carefully protected by close-fitting slides.

With all the damage above, it was found that only

a foot or two of water washed in the depths of the hulk, which a few stout arms at the pump could have soon reduced to no suction point.

Tier upon tier of high piled wooden cases met the eyes of the explorers in advance of the revealing rays of the lantern. The appraising glance of the lieutenant resulted in laconic comment: "Rifles."

At the next turning of the narrow passageway between the boxes, and guarded by heavy wire netting, closely woven, were many metal receptacles, embedded in bins over-brimming with excelsior packing material.

"The 'no smoking' sign is not needed here," said the gunner, backing away with the lantern under his coat. "I am used to this business, yet could be pardoned for the hope of absence if there happened to be another bomb shower over-deck."

"Explosive stuff!" exclaimed Billy. "The missing crew has my congratulations!"

"The same good word for us," put in Henri, "we nearly ran into a wagon-load of it not so very long ago."

"Well, my lads," observed the lieutenant, "we would all be in line for a decoration if we could save and deliver all this to the nearest Italian port to a cruiser if it should happen along under our colors."

As he spoke the officer set the pace for return to the deck. Once more in the cabin, the aviators took another invoice of the contents, with result of a

new find by Billy in a wall-pocket against which the door had backed when Henri first forced entrance. The Bangor boy held up for the inspection of his companions an exquisitely-fashioned dagger, with jeweled handle and a blade that glittered like silver when withdrawn from its embossed morocco sheath.

The lieutenant emitted a whistle of admiring surprise. "That's a beauty, my lad. Why, there's a ruby in the handle-top that would bring a pretty penny, not to mention the other stones. And what is that engraved on the blade? 'Dal Segno.' Italian, and meaning 'repeat from the sign.' Put it in your pocket, lad; you may gladden the heart of the owner some day."

"With our sign of the rings and now a knife repeater, we're going some, seems to me," laughed Henri.

The chief smilingly regarded the Trouville lad. "Even the life-line is not considered seriously until the breakers show their teeth." There was a veiled meaning in the remark, which the boy did not wholly comprehend, but he quickly added to his light words: "Perhaps it is only true, sir, that 'all signs fail in fair weather.'"

Speaking of fair weather, the same was certainly then favoring the airmen during their stay on the wreck, and it was the apprehension that the gentle

breezes might not continue gentle which induced immediate contemplation of renewed flight.

While the ship's papers, as before stated, were not in evidence, the vessel's identity as a munitions carrier for the Italian troops, very likely those engaged in the Balkan Peninsula, considering its presence in these remote waters, was fully established by its equipment, cabin contents and cargo markings.

Such being the fact, and every chance pointing to the craft, in this locality, finally becoming, with all it contained, the prize of some hostile warship, the lieutenant very seriously considered the plan of leaving a slow-match in the hold when the seaplane departed.

But this idea fell short of development, as did also the other thought of promptly getting away from the wreck. Both were alarmingly eliminated by the sudden advent in the blue dome above of two war birds, no doubt the same pair which our airmen supposed they had effectually distanced, and, too, very likely, the identical bombsters originally responsible for the partial destruction of the Italian ship.

"That's what we get for being asleep at the switch," complained Billy, as the trio, after the initial shock of discovery, covertly watched the movements of the aerial enemy through a gap in the cabin roof.

The big flying machines were working downward with every gyration, and the concealed aviators appreciated the futility of then attempting to reach and raise their own seaplane before their antagonists should take advantage of topside position and use projectiles with deadly effect.

Another dangerous possibility of making their presence known at the moment was that the hovering airships might precipitate a volley of fire-balls on the derelict itself, and reaching the combustibles in the hold, end in fragments the promising careers of Our Young Aeroplane Scouts and their gunner comrade.

As luck would have it, the unsuspecting operators in descent splashed their craft in the stern wake of the wreck, while the seaplane of our aviators was floating under the prow, and not to be seen from the rear.

In the meantime the lieutenant had coolly helped himself to one of the several rifles in the cabin racks, and the boys took pattern by appropriating two of the remaining guns.

The Austrian aviators took their time in mounting the ship by the climbing route aft, and two heavyweights of the quartette took still more time regaining their breath when reaching the deck. Of the pair who leisurely advanced on the cabin, only one appeared to be armed, and none of the party in the least expecting to scrap for possession of

the space they occupied on this apparently deserted barque.

Warned somehow or other—perchance an unwitting move by one of the defenders in the cabin too close to the open window at the rear—the leading Austrian halted stockstill in his tracks, and dropped a hand to the holster at his side.

In exposed position and near enough to show the whites of his eyes the big aviator was an easy mark for any sort of rifleman. The boys turned joint and expectant gaze on their companion, and then aghast to see him holding the gun he had seized, not in aim, but reversed and converted into a club.

“The thing’s as empty as a gourd,” was the muttered explanation. “No cartridges.”

Step by step backward the two foremost intruders were retreating to the stern-post where their comrades were resting, and where a shattered mast and the debris piled about it formed a fairly respectable barricade.

Shrewdly surmising that the Austrians would soon hoist a little arsenal of weapons from their seaplanes, the lieutenant was in for rushing them before such accomplishment and taking the unequal chance, numerically and of size, with a repeating revolver thrown in for worse balance.

Billy, however, had conceived a brilliant coup, better named a bold bluff, as later illustrated. He earnestly besought the chief to lie low for awhile,

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and pledging full satisfaction in the experiment he had in mind, preparation for which consisted, as a starter, in lighting the lantern—a coal-oil burner, by the way—and a cumbersome but most effective illuminant.

Other queer moves of the Bangor boy, in rapid succession, were removal of cap and jacket, the rending of the button-line in shirt front, laying bare his throat and breast, liberal applications to his face of lamp-black accumulated on the base of the lantern, and a Fiji arrangement of his hair, which had for some time needed the attention of a barber.

“Don’t think I’m a ‘nut,’ chief,” he pleaded, during this lightning change performance. “The make-up is for the last desperate survivor of the bomb-wreck.”

As if fearing restraint, Billy, a strange figure, darted out of the cabin door, and straight to the forward hatch, which had been opened by our aviators when first going between decks. The lifted half-door with sheathed underside provided a shield for the lad as he stood at the edge of the aperture.

Hardly had the Bangor boy assumed the pose he desired to present when the soldier-airman with the revolver fired the first shot from cover aft, and the bullet zipped uncomfortably close to Billy’s right ear. Nervously anticipating that this shot would bring the lieutenant, fighting mad, into the open, the young scout hastened the action of his scheme by

giving vent to an unearthly screech, at the same time doing some frantic juggling with the lantern.

The hostile aviators, all now provided with fire-arms, refrained from using them on the crazily posturing shape on the fore-deck, viewing these antics with open-mouthed astonishment, not wholly devoid of the uncanny regard usually invoked by those demented.

Having his "audience" fixed for the moment, Billy stood out boldly in front of the open hatch.

"One step and that's your last! The death walk for you if you move!"

The words conveying the threat, and sinister warning, too, were shrilled in the Teuton tongue, with which language Billy was thoroughly conversant, and which, also, he used so that there could be no misunderstanding on the part of those he wanted to impress.

Framed now in the cabin doorway, the lieutenant and Henri stood, wonder-eyed, and in strained attitude of watching and listening to the fantastic heroics of their usually level-headed comrade.

"See the flame?" Billy swung aloft the big lantern.

"Down there"—the boy designated by a descending motion of the hand over the hole in the deck—"down there," he loudly repeated, "is the blow-up stuff, tons of it! Slip my grip on this oil-burner, shiver its glass in a crash below, and who'll care?

Will you?" The final interrogation was Billy's highest note.

Even as he sounded the ominous question, the lad under aim of several shining tubes, yet without the slightest hesitation he lowered a foot within the hatchway and, also, the hand that held the lantern.

"I'm your messenger!" he again shouted. "Bang away, and I'll deliver!"

For reasons best known to themselves, the men behind the guns did not insist on "delivery" by a pull at the triggers. Perhaps for the reason that Billy, having had his say, adroitly withdrew to the safe side of the iron-sheathed trap; perhaps for the reason that the large four, thought they were dealing with a maniac who could and actually would produce an explosion which would blow everybody and everything roundabout into smithereens; perhaps—and this last a tangible exhibit in the form of an upcurling of smoke above the sea something like a mile to the southeast—the backward trend of the spiral wreaths indicating that the craft under the producing funnel was coming head-on in direct approach to the wreck.

In closer perspective the on-driving vessel showed the lines of a great warship. All eyes from the derelict were turned in the direction of the plowing leviathan, Billy retiring as a center of attraction.

Of intense interest, indeed, to the contending

forces on the littered deck of the munitions craft—that vital query:

What colors would wave over the ironsides when she steamed alongside?

CHAPTER XVI.

A SHINDY IN SAN LORENZO.

THE Austrian quartette solved the problem by anticipation—one of them had a pair of field-glasses swung over his shoulder, and what he saw and imparted to his companions caused their instant exodus from the wreck and the liveliest kind of labor in getting the seaplanes under way. For the first time, in rising, the departing aviators saw that the young tragedian at the hatch was not the only “desperate survivor” on the deck of the derelict.

The three comrades had moved together to the port-side of the munitions craft for eager greeting of the approaching warship, surmising from the action of the enemy airmen that the big vessel was not an Austrian belonging.

“It’s a bully finish; eh, chief?” Henri was doing the hurrah act with a highly colored neckerchief he had picked up in the cabin.

“If I’m not to be taken for an escaped cannibal,” said Billy, “it’s the nearest water-butt for me, and, really, I’m mighty sorry now that I discharged my valet last week.”

17 “Put on the captain’s uniform, while you’re at

it," suggested the lieutenant, giving the Bangor boy an affectionate tap on the shoulder; "you're the boss this day, according to my vote."

When Billy returned to the outlook point with a clean face, the lieutenant was responding to a hail from the bridge of the warship, a sure-enough member of the Italian fleet in the Adriatic.

From that moment until they again saw land, our aviators were freed of anxiety as to failing supply of petrol, cross-currents, attacks by other aircraft and short rations, as there were snug quarters gladly provided on the war vessel for the whole outfit, the flyers and their machine. There was a lot of satisfaction, too, in seeing that floating prize in tow.

Going ashore at Brindisi, Billy remarked to the chief: "I suppose you'll be starting for Rome now to have something pinned or tied onto your coat-front."

"Rome it may be, my lad," was the reply, "but not for that. To no prowess of mine is due the recovery of the hull and cargo just drawn into this harbor. For most honorable mention I have another name to propose."

The Bangor boy was embarrassed by the scrutiny of the chief, as the latter completed the statement above quoted.

"If you're referring to anybody present, sir, please count me out. I'm confessing right now that

I never intended to drop that lantern, and, too, chief, you'll remember that I got under cover when I saw the gun muzzles pointed my way."

Lieutenant Tenento did not make it an argument, simply giving Billy a good hand-grip and turning to lead the way cityward.

The three comrades spent the next five days in Brindisi, the veteran aviator awaiting orders for that special scout duty which was his continuing assignment.

Early one morning the chief advised the boys that his next journey would not be aerial travel. "After all, my lad," he said, directly addressing Billy, "you did not miss it a mile when you mentioned me as a possible tourist to Rome. But not for decorative purpose, I assure you," concluded the officer, with a twinkle in his eye.

"No question, sir, is there, but what we're going with you?" The Bangor boy plainly was not desirous of a separation.

"Nothing is further from my mind than to quit you here, my lads," assured the chief. "What the future may do to dissolve this company I know not, but as far as I can see, there are three of us in all the plans that I may personally make."

"Bully!"

Billy and Henri sounded the note of approbation in the same breath.

In the capital of Italy, that city of vast propor-

tions, where the finest ancient architecture is everywhere to be found, and to many the most interesting place in all Europe, our boys were delighted with the opportunity to have a free hand in looking about, a chance afforded by some business of state and war importance in which their chief and comrade was concerned and commanding his constant attendance.

When Billy and Henri had seen those things most frequently mentioned in travelogues, the Vatican, the Church of Saint Peter's, the Colosseum, the Pantheon, the Castle of Saint Angelo, the Royal Palace, the beautiful villas of the suburbs, the Catacombs, the Roman Forum, adorned with temples, triumphal arches and columns, and also celebrated paintings and statuary without end and without rest, there were two tired aviators who needed the inspiration of something more exciting to put again the spring in their weary bones.

"Our first peep at this town," recalled Billy, "was only a snapshot. I had no idea there was so much of it."

"Shades of Nero and Caesar, pal, have you forgotten how many times the census has been taken here?" Henri dodged a boxing blow aimed at him by his chum.

With it all, however, the "Eternal City" was, in the eyes of our boys, war-marked, not in the sense of havoc wrought by invading forces, for its existing glories were untouched, but strangely man-bereft

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by reason of those multiplied thousands who had marched and were marching to that place of horrors called the front. No public parades and demonstrations of the people—even the feasts, with their banners and processional symbols, had been abandoned by order of the authorities. And many, many the house, mansion and hovel, where the angel of death had claimed its tribute for the Patria.

But Our Young Aeroplane Scouts had grown used, if not callous, to the scars of conflict, and it was one of the few vacations with which they had been favored in extended periods of strenuous service. So they had made the best of it, with no anticipation of any untoward happening this side of the actual fighting grounds.

What did happen, though, had its inception in a manner hardly imaginable at the time, and during an afternoon venture in San Lorenzo district, which is to Rome what the East End is to London and the lowest quarters of the East Side to New York, where among many struggling, hard-working people from the Abruzzi or the Sabine hills, that other element abounds—the “teppisti” or criminal class. From the latter terrifying numbers the war had drawn some fierce fighters, who in and out of the trenches might shoot and stab without being sent to prison for it.

Why Billy and Henri extended their wanderings to the muddy and dirty streets of this undesirable

section is an issue chargeable, as often, only to the inquisitive bumps under their caps and total lack of timidity in their general and mutual make-up.

Even then, with the moral tone of the neighborhood, so claimed, greatly improved by the considerable exodus of the men in the military ranks, the lads might have come and gone without more than remembrance of the odors of the fish and vegetable pushcarts, if it had not been for Billy's generous impulse of dropping a lira (20 cents) into the hand of a wan-faced child, sitting in front of one of the drab and sordid tenements at the junction of two of the most wretched and crowded streets in the poverty-haunted district.

While in the act of returning to his pocket several additional coins from which the gift of charity had been selected, upon the lad's wrist was laid, from behind, the sudden grip of a sinewy hand, accompanied by a jerk which scattered the money pieces on the slimy pavement. The Bangor boy whirled about to meet the owner of the ready fingers, a squatty individual with a massive neck and a bad eye.

Billy aimed a smashing blow at the knot of the red handkerchief which fringed the column between the fellow's head and shoulders, but did not reach the mark, owing to the distraction of Henri's outcry: "He's got a knife, Buddy; look out!"

The Bangor boy promptly backed away, careful

in keeping his would-be assailant in line of vision, while a half-dozen ragged urchins scrambled on the ground in search of the scattered coins.

With the menacing advance of the hold-up man, with the blade of a stiletto concealed in his coat-sleeve, young Barry bethought himself of the only weapon he was carrying, the jeweled dagger he had found on the wreck. Unsheathed, the glittering point held at bay the crouching brigand of the streets.

The not uncommon scene hereabouts of an altercation had not as yet attracted any considerable crowd, and the few then gathering were apparently all of the stripe of the thick-necked rascal.

Henri had ranged alongside his chum with clenched fists, having failed to find any brick or stone which was not tied fast to the ground.

The tense situation was remarkably relieved by a confusion of loud and hearty voices a little distance down the street, to the rear of where the boys were standing.

As if by magic the threatening element dispersed and disappeared in the jungle of hovels nearby.

Before the young scouts could turn about and ascertain the cause of this quick dissolution, Billy got another wrist grip above the dagger hand, and in his ear a sounding bass utterance:

"Here's a pretty toy for youngsters to play with."

The newcomer fired this verbal cannon in Italian, at the same time taking possession of the "toy" he was talking about.

Billy offered no resistance. He liked the looks of the three ruddy, sailor-garbed men who had so opportunely arrived.

Transfigured was the present possessor of the dagger. His smiling countenance had lost its flush and his big blue eyes had dwindled to narrow focus in concentrated gaze at the shining object reposing in his broad palm.

"Has a ghost crossed your path, Hilary?" laughingly questioned the comrade at the elbow of the engrossed inspector.

The latter neither answered nor apparently noticed the speaker. Shifting the dagger between thumb and forefinger the sailor called to Hilary and to Billy who was doing his share of staring at the queer-acting tar:

"How came you by this?"

Seeing the puzzled expression in Billy's face, the questioner repeated the words in fairly good English.

"Oh, I get you now," said the boy. "I picked that up on a craft that had gone wrong at sea."

"The Helene?" The sailor's interrogation was one eager and earnest.

"Don't know the name, sir. Her papers were gone, and I didn't see any sign in front. Loaded, though, with guns and boxes of shooting material."

"That your lost ship, Hilary?" sympathetically inquired one of the other seafarers.

"Not lost by a long shot," broke in Henri. "The craft has a good bed this day in Brindisi harbor."

"The saints be praised!" joyfully exclaimed Hilary.

"Who does that knife belong to, anyhow?" Billy was curious on that point.

"Captain Dirigo, at Naples now with an empty sleeve. We carried him off the brig unconscious when it seemed certain that the bombs from aloft would reach the explosives below. We couldn't fight back against that sort of attack, my lad."

"How about the big blow? Were you in that?" Both questions by Henri.

"Blow! A gale of which I've seldom seen the like on the Adriatic. Only our longboat and five of us in it reached shore, and I don't know how, either." The sailor shook his head when recalling the experience.

"Well," said Billy, "give the knife to Captain Dirigo with my compliments, and also tell him for me that his name is mighty good Latin, for it was adopted as the motto of Maine, United States of America," (I direct or guide) "the state that con-

tains Bangor and the home of William Thomas Barry."

"Hear! Hear!" Henri heard from again.

The tower chimes were ringing the evening hour of six when Billy and Henri said farewell to their sailor friends. Hilary would not listen to a word of thanks from the boys, claiming that he owed them more than he could ever hope to return for the news that had been given him. "To say nothing," he continued, "of the captain's debt of gratitude when he gets your message along with the dagger."

"I believe," remarked Henri, on the way to rejoin the lieutenant in the hotel, "that if we told the story of our falling in with the wreck once, that number should be multiplied by twenty-seven."

"What's the word, chief?" Billy found the lieutenant engaged in poring over a small map in the apartment the aviators were occupying.

"Back to Brindisi to-morrow," responded the officer, "and thence by seaplane to Venice. Soon again on the old stamping grounds, my lads. How did the day run with you?"

The boys detailed their experiences in the San Lorenzo region, much to the interest of the listener.

"One of the signs worked overtime, eh, lad?" The lieutenant was looking at Henri, except for a second it took to tip Billy the wink.

Within forty-eight hours the seaplane splashed

into the Bay of Venice, with our aviators counting the trip as a high mark for aerial speed records.

"You can wade around here for a day or two," said the chief, when the trio stepped from a gondola into the Merceria, the longest and most important walking avenue in Venice, having width of only fifteen feet.

"No need of a traffic squad in this burg," remarked Billy, as the lieutenant and his young companions sought lodging in one of the numerous hotels in the vicinity.

"And no money in a livery stable," added Henri.

During the day, and after boating about in many so-called streets of sparkling water, Billy and Henri, left again to their own devices, sought the solid footing of the Rialto, that magnificent bridge of marble over the Grand Canal, the upper surface of which is divided, by two ranges of shops, into three narrow parallel thoroughfares.

As slight tribute to a dress-up occasion the boys adorned their hands with the rings presented to them by the recluse of Goeritz, and to which both Antonio and Lieutenant Tenento mysteriously attributed unknown virtue.

It was just another of those innocent "ifs" which seemed to figure in the fortunes of our boys, even in intended peaceful pursuit of recreative pleasure.

"If" the lads had not so subscribed to the happily slight desire in their composition for vain display,

and kept the shining circlets in their pockets, all the adventure they might reasonably expect in an afternoon stroll on the Rialto would not go far as a pulse quickener.

"If" also the rings had escaped particular notice by a roving eye in one of the shops Billy and Henri might never have known to what "order" they actually belonged.

CHAPTER XVII.

BY THE SIGN OF THE RINGS.

THE boys were very much taken with the displays in the various stores that were presented for passing review—jewelry, mirrors, silks, velvets, porcelain, and all the chief articles of Venetian manufacture in attractive array. What money the lads had in their pockets burned for an outlet, but, as Billy questioned, “what’s the use of blowing our coin for knickknacks when we don’t know, from day to day, where next we’ll lay our heads?”

Yet there was no harm in looking, and the young scouts did a lot of that. It was Henri who became anchored at a counter where was shown some wonderfully alluring devices in glass-work, the art product of skilled artisans.

Billy, not so much impressed as his chum with this line of goods, had turned to inspect a shirt of mail, finely woven steel, against which the finest-pointed poinard would go blunt. He lifted a hand to test the heft of the delicately wrought body armor, and then his attention was diverted by the affable address of a distinguished-looking gentleman of most correct attire and engaging manner.

"Is the signor interested in this sort of handicraft? If it should so please him to know, I am also a collector of such things." The liquid Venetian Billy did not altogether comprehend, but what he could not avoid observing was the fixed contemplation the stranger was bestowing upon that uplifted hand with the ring on it.

Henri by this time had separated himself from the glassware attraction, and joined his comrade just as the suave individual completed his overture to Billy.

The latter had not yet been able to determine whether he was being tackled by a "gold-brick" artist or complimented by some one high and mighty from a palace along the canal.

A quick mental decision on the part of the Trouville lad favored the man who was making up to his chum, though he was more or less puzzled by the interest the Italian swell was manifesting in the affairs of Billy Barry.

Henri, however, soon discovered that he, too, was classed as worthy of special notice by the stranger, which development succeeded a movement of the boy's ring hand in touching his cap, as acknowledgment of the smile and bow which greeted his approach.

Returning his gaze to Billy, the pleasant-spoken gentleman resumed reference to the subject upon which he had first spoken, pointed out and explained

the process of steel-linking the protective garment which Billy had been examining.

The shopkeeper cinched the status of the speaker by bustling up and profoundly apologizing for failing to immediately note the incoming of "my dear count."

Thus absolutely assured that they were not sacrifices to a confidence game, our boys had no hesitation in accepting a politely tendered bid to view the armor collection claimed by the new acquaintance.

The only thing that persistently stuck crosswise in the minds of the young scouts was just why a man of his consequence would be bothering about a pair of sightseers with nothing, they thought, out of the ordinary to recommend them.

"My dear count," also, every once in awhile appeared to be looking for something that the lads might do, and yet did not—some word, some sign or gesture, perhaps. This was evidenced by the way the Italian would pause in conversation, in the middle of a sentence occasionally, and interrogate with his eyes, more than once accompanying the mute question with repetition of a curious finger movement.

As otherwise the talker appeared accurately balanced and now vouched for by a tradesman who ought, and no doubt did, know his uppercrust patrons, Billy and Henri charged everything up to foreign temperament and readily followed the cor-

dial invitation-giver into the gondola which the latter summoned after leaving the bridge.

While swiftly and smoothly gliding through the Grand Canal, the host deeply deplored the bomb-wrecking of the Church of the Scalzi, which ruin the gondola was at the moment passing.

"That was our first sight in Venice," remarked Billy. "We were then on the way to the front."

"Then you are soldiers?" The count had not before made the slightest attempt to sound the boys as to their immediate past. For some reason he had taken them for granted, and for the same reason sought them without their seeking in return.

It was not far from the Ducal Palace, where the gondola halted at the base of a short flight of broad stone steps, surmounted, right and left, by a pair of bronze griffins.

"Most welcome, signors," declared the count, insisting that his guests precede him in alighting, and then leading in ascent to the massive door, which noiselessly swung inward before an outward summons could be laid upon it.

From a wide hallway the boys entered upon an interior scene of magnificent breadth and artistic arrangement, modern luxury joined with ancient splendor.

"Gee, if the lieutenant could see us now!" was Billy's aside to his chum. The latter, however, was not saying a word. He was just looking. He had

lived in a home something like this, the Château Trouville, razed in the sorrowful past by giant howitzers.

The guests cheerfully served the host's hobby with exclamations of wonder and admiration in the viewing of the armorial collection, bringing back the olden days of knighthood, chivalry, hand-to-hand combat, and all that. But along with helmet, armlet, shield, halberd and pike, the boys glimpsed the later day outfit of an Italian colonel, and a sword with no rust on it.

As the day was waning, the young scouts conceived it a proper and timely proceeding for them to say farewell and forthwith rejoin their chief at the established headquarters.

But their going was not yet. The count was not to be denied in the extension of his hospitality, and as much as said that it would be well worth the while of his young friends to linger.

Billy and Henri out of mere curiosity would have traded a year or two of life for some inkling as to what really constituted the value of their continued visit in this palace. Premonition had hit them forcibly that there would be something doing later on.

As the hours of six, seven, and eight rolled up in the scroll of time, the young scouts fought a restless streak, and it was pretty near a settled thing with them that in about twenty minutes to come two

aviator boys would be trying the bolts on the big front door.

A tall servitor in short breeches served them with coffee, but of the count they had seen nothing since he bade them make themselves comfortable in this smaller apartment at the end of the hall.

The getaway plan was abandoned before it even had a start. From sounds without the room in which they were sitting or, rather, reclining on the soft side of a couple of hair-stuffed divans, the boys were convinced that more company was arriving.

They heard a voice, among others, which made them sit up and take notice.

"Shucks, it can't be," asserted Billy, lying back again on the cushions. "I must have something like the willies."

"Two in the same boat, then," persisted Henri. "I could almost swear that my ears didn't deceive me. But, as you say, it 'can't be.' I'll have to take the imagination cure, too."

The very next diversion was the entrance of the count, beaming like a harvest moon.

"I may soon make return for your patience, signors," said the genial host, "and I sincerely hope that in the renewal of our pledges you will find that uplift ever inspired by the principles of truth, fealty and benevolence."

In concession to Billy's limited acquaintance with the language, a number of times impressed by the

boys' puzzled expression when previously addressed by the count, the latter had dropped Italian as a means of communication in favor of English, and, occasionally, French.

But even in full understanding of all the count was now saying, as far as the words were concerned, the "renewal of pledges" proposition might well have been presented in Greek for all the young scout was the wiser in regard to the underlying meaning.

Henri, though an all-around linguist, was not a whit better off than his chum in relation to the hidden point at which the speaker was driving. At least he was dumb in the matter until a shaft of memory suddenly hit him where he thought. The very words of the lieutenant! And, too, of Antonio! The symbol rings! Here was the key to the whole situation—the potent reason for these attentions, for their presence in the palace, for this strange experience, for all that had gone before and all that was to come. "What dummies we were," thought the boy; and, more important now, "what else are we going to be when there's a show-down?"

The Trouville lad was reminded of a story he had once read about a youth who was troubled with an overwhelming desire to "see the wheels go 'round" wherever he went, and chancing to be alone in the machinery section of a big factory he pressed an inviting button with terrifying result of clang and

clatter that scared the performer out of seven years' growth, for he had not the least idea where was located the button that would stop the tremendous racket.

It was the starting button against which the young scouts had leaned, but where in the dickens was the stopper? They had nothing ready to try on the count as a brake, to save walking into some "inner chamber of dread secrets," which inside, ancient history had charged in various forms to the City of the Doges.

With imagination working overtime, the lads were finding small degree of reassurance in the smiling visage of the count, and most reluctant were the steps they took in following their host to the double-doors across the great hall, thrown open at their approach by a stalwart servitor.

With a long banquet table, resplendent with a glittering array of silver and glass, in line of vision, and eye-dazzled by the shining points of surmounting candelabra, Billy and Henri at first failed to note the standing group of men at the far end of the festal board.

They did not fail to hear, however, the almost uproarious greeting, in which familiar voices mingled, and, spellbound, awaited the vigorous handshaking with which they were immediately beset. Colonel Nicolini, Captain Vespia, Lieutenant Tenento and, by the powers, Antonio, as large as

life and even more so, in the showy uniform of the royal guards.

“‘Id genus omne’ ” (all of that sort) proclaimed the lieutenant. Every man present wore the ring with the edelweiss emblem.

“To our honorary members,” gaily toasted the host when the guests were seated, the boys choosing places, one on each side of their tried and true friend in mountain adventure.

“And we were just beginning to think it would be ‘ornery’ members,” laughed Billy. “What a frame-up,” he added, imitating a person with damaged feelings.

As the surprise party proceeded, Our Young Aeroplane Scouts were almost persuaded that they had done something in the service worth recounting, Lieutenant Tenento relating, with fine effect, the story of the Bangor boy’s high-jinks with lamp-black and lantern on the bomb-stricken ship.

Antonio contributed another instance of unique performance on the part of his young friend, connected with a night scene on Trieste plain. “And this lad,” continued the big fellow, with an arm around Henri’s shoulder, “is about the steadiest youngster I ever met on the danger line.”

The “steadiest youngster” instantly essayed to change the subject by asking Lieutenant Tenento if the arrangement of this entertainment was not

intended as an object lesson to one who did not before believe in fairies.

"Or any virtue in signs or symbols," quietly remarked the officer, without directly answering the facetious query.

Then the talk drifted to the stern realities of warfare and the prospect of a renewal of intense activity after a lull of some weeks.

The senior diners, nearly all, were to leave in the morning for the Carso plateau, where formidable artillery actions had been resumed, in furtherance of the onslaught upon Goeritz.

Our boys had as yet no intimation of their next assignment, but presumed that they would go on to Grado for final orders.

At midnight the assembled company rose for the farewell toast.

Two words sufficed, solemnly spoken by Captain Vespia:

"The master!"

At dawn the three aviators flew northward in the airship, the last oversea journey in that direction with the lieutenant, for at Grado this officer was given detail which held him to staff duty, while the boys went back to the regular aerial corps and biplane work, in company with Luigi, Moroni and other veterans, destined before long to mix in the daily attacks by the Italians against the entrenched camp of Podgora.

Billy and Henri went even farther afield as flying messengers, and in the Tyrolese Alps witnessed some novel methods in mountain warfare.

Avalanche fighting had been in progress for two weeks, when the commission of the young scouts carried them into the territory where the new method conflict was being waged.

The first demonstration of the singular operations came within a hair-line of jarring the high-sailing aircraft out of balance and control, and as clearly threatened the lives of its occupants.

Billy was hunting a place for smooth landing when a shell fired at an Austrian redoubt of lofty location exploded a short distance from the course of the biplane, which shivered fore and aft like something sentient, dipped and whirled and partially overturned. Had the pilot for an instant lost his presence of mind, an unrestrained plunge of a thousand feet would have certainly ensued.

But the Bangor boy kept his head and his grip on the lifting levers and succeeded in getting and holding a level. If cold perspiration started from every pore of his flesh it no more than proved that even the most daring aviators are neither more nor less than human.

Again in steady flight, the young birdmen could give pardonably nervous attention to a sight they would not soon forget. The terrific impact of the shell had started a great slide of snow and earth

which roared down the mountain side in thunderous volume.

The tremendous sweep of the artificially created avalanche descended with frightful force upon an Austrian column making its way single file along the edge of a steep cliff, and hurled many of the soldiers into a gorge hundreds of feet below.

“That takes my nerve, Buddy!”

Henri’s outcry was almost hysterical.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN ANSWER THAT SHOCKED.

WHILE Billy and Henri foregathered with the Italian Alpinists they had other opportunities of observing the practice of the opposing forces, who by shelling the mountain sides under which the troops were encamped, or by exploding mines, sent thousands of tons of rocks and snow rolling down upon enemy soldiers.

The effect of these maneuvers in blockading railroads and highways made difficult all troop movements in the vicinity, and it was only the aviation corps which could laugh at such dangerously created barriers.

Our young scouts were constantly winging about in reconnoitering service, and in their flights many times under as well as over fire from the enemy defense works on the surrounding heights. The result was that in this continuous exposure the aviators ventured once too often where the shooting had been particularly accurate, a chunk of lead penetrated the motor section of the biplane, and only the skillful management of the pilot in volplaning saved a finishing crash.

The fall, at the end of a long slide, and only an additional illustration of the cat-o'-nine-lives fortune of the boys, was on soft ground within a few yards of the Italian trenches, out of which had been blazing return shots at the battery point where Billy and Henri got their bullet notice to quit.

It was no time nor place for the aviators to tinker with the damaged aircraft, but they managed to drag the machine to the rear of one of the passages hewn out of the fresh earth, and where there was cover for it behind a pile of debris raised by digging.

The first tender of assistance from the tunnels came at the hands of a boyish-appearing soldier, in about the same age class as the young birdmen, who did not seem at all disturbed when every now and then a shell burned the air overhead.

"Not a good day for flying, signors," was his smiling salutation.

"Not the best in the world," promptly agreed Billy.

The trench in which the boys sought shelter was not a half bad place to rest, having been paved with wood, which, the young soldier explained, "made it very comfortable when rain came down in torrents."

While the shells from the mountain batteries were tearing craters here and there, the ditch refuge of the chums remained untouched, and, strange to relate, the lads did not begin to realize that it was a wearing experience, this cramped confinement in

close quarters, until with nightfall the big guns stopped. When the uproar ceased, the cannon silent, somehow the moments were fraught with sensations that our aviators called "creepy," making it hard to suppress a desire to climb out, run, yell, or do something or other equally as foolish. The youngsters had been in trenches before, and Billy could only account for their existing disturbance of mind by a characteristic remark to his chum: "I guess we're a little off our feed, Buddy."

The truth of the matter is, experienced trench fighters have told of just such experiences as our boys were undergoing. A captain of light infantry has written: "You are not cool enough to feel fear during battle, but when the turmoil suddenly ceases you have a sensation that something is going to happen, but what you do not know. You expect anything. Those are the horrible moments."

If the soldiers in the trench with them were not similarly keyed up, Billy and Henri became aware that at least there was stealthy movement in evidence down the line, machine guns loaded and pointed, and a general preparedness which betokened expectation of assault.

Mysterious life filled the night full of strange lights and sounds. The boys, standing on ammunition boxes, looked out from the top of the trench toward the dimly visible foreground, which their imagination filled with groping shadows.

Far to the right the storm broke loose, with crack of rifles, the spitting fire of the machine weapons, the strident shriek of shells, the dull rumble of the big guns and the bursting of torpedoes. A double line swept forward and a thinner line receded. The noises died away. The trenches held and the defenders settled back into impregnable position.

Our young campaigners were quite calmed. At the real thing they never balked. The atmosphere to them was no longer charged with that mystery filled with phantoms and will-o'-the-wisps which causes the bravest to shudder. In other words, Billy and Henri were again trench-proof.

During a lull in the day fighting, and by withdrawal of the damaged flying machine to safer distance, the aviators got busy in patching up the plugged center of motive power, and so efficient their labor that in less than half a day the aircraft responded as of old to the guiding hands of its operator.

When again the young scouts hit the old trail along the Isonzo front they flew into torrential rains and fog that were greatly impeding the Italian artillery, but the infantry was up to the mark in their attacks against the enemy positions on the Sabotino slopes.

Here it was that Billy and Henri made the acquaintance of members of the "Company of

Death," clad in steel helmets and suits of armor like the knights of the Middle Ages, whose duty it is to cut the enemy's barbed wire entanglements preparatory to infantry charges.

"They look like the count's collection back in Venice," declared the Bangor boy, when the chums observed an early morning departure from camp of these picturesque wire-carvers.

"I'd as lieve run against a two-edged sword as one of those pole-axes they're packing," commented Henri.

When the next day, from aloft, the aviators watched the Queen's infantry brigade storm with the bayonet and capture a strong redoubt, the shine of those steel helmets could everywhere be seen where the fighting was most active and intense.

It was Captain Bertelmo of these "tangle-breakers" with whom the boys indulged in a volunteer scouting venture that was entirely ground-work at a time when they were waiting the arrival of transport wagons with a fresh supply of petrol, the lack of which had temporarily put a check on aeroplaning.

This officer well knew Antonio as a fellow-climber when the mountains were not disturbed by the alarms of war, and this mutual acquaintance brought himself and the young aviators into closer communion than otherwise would have prevailed.

Owing to his intimate knowledge of the high

places in the vicinity, the captain had been elected to undertake the dangerous feat of ascertaining and, if possible, reducing the hidden strength of an elevated battery of the enemy which had worked havoc with every attempt of the Italian troops to force the passage of a certain mountain road leading to a point of vantage above the boundary formed by the lower heights of Pevma, Oslavia, and the hill which faces toward Goeritz, between Podgora and Sabotino.

When Billy and Henri saw their new friend without his metal harness one evening at the camp section they frequented and noted that he had replaced the customary pole-axe of his calling with an alpenstock, they were immediately curious as to his suspected change of action.

"What's in the wind, captain?" asked the Bangor boy. "You've quit carrying weight all of a sudden."

"Oh," was the jocose reply, "I don't always sleep in my field rig." Then further response was with more serious tone and manner: "I don't mind telling you, lads, that for a little time I am going back to my old trade." The speaker pointed upward to the mist-veiled peaks.

"Can't you call for assistance? My pard and I are listening." The query and suggestion came from Henri.

The little but decisive word "no" was forming on the lips of the soldier, but not spoken. Another

thought had intervened. "It is no pleasure trip, my friends," he gravely intimated.

"We're not looking for picnics in these times," remarked Billy. "Count us in, sir, do, please." The boy had observed that wavering from the officer's first inclination to refuse the petition presented by Henri.

"You might be of use, after all," reflectively continued the captain; "with your experience, there ought to be a pair of steady heads on those shoulders of yours."

"Then we're going," announced Billy, as positively as if the issue was settled beyond question.

"There are higher authorities to consult," remarked Captain Bertelmo, amused by the boy's snap judgment. "Take it easy, my lads, until I can have a word with the colonel."

To the lads awaiting, that "word" seemed one of a thousand syllables, and they had begun to fear that their friend had given them the "slip," when he returned with information which brought the youngsters to their feet with an enthusiastic salute.

Shortly before midnight, the trio, bearing alpenstocks and rope coils—an additional burden of the leader being a heavy canvas case securely strapped across the shoulders—were picking their way to dizzy heights by intricate paths with which the guide was, happily, familiar. In many places traversed a single false step by any one of the trav-

elers would have put a straining test on the connecting cord and those who might stand as anchors.

Resting, at length, in a cleft indenting the base of one of the loftiest crags in the mountain chain, the captain utilized the breathing spell by very carefully removing the binding straps from the canvas case, the boys posing as animated lamp-posts, contributing rays from their pocket flashlights to aid their comrade in his task.

With the opening of the receptacle all that showed under the slender shaft of illumination was a mass of cotton tightly compressed in the top of the case. The man on the job knew that closely packed below were a dozen or more gray cylinders, with a dismembering and destructive force beyond any accurate calculation.

The young scouts, at sight of the soft packing, were not slow in realizing and believing that such precaution had to do with explosives—the kind that did not need a hammer to set them off. If they backstepped, which they certainly did, it was an unconscious confirmation of such realization and belief.

As cool as a cucumber, the captain recalled Billy to his former position with the light, at the same time producing from an inner pocket of his jacket a small package protected by tin-foil, and which outer covering the soldier deliberately tore off, dis-

playing a little coil of what appeared to be harp-strings.

"Here's a landmark that will have to go," said the officer, taking the flashlight from Billy's hand and walking towards a curious rock formation that dominated the extremity of the ledge and as curiously leaned outward and over the underlying slope that was the highest of many breaking the precipitous descending line of the mountain side.

Looking down the declivity, the boys could see in the darkness enveloping the lower stratas the intermittent glow of scattered lights, and, too, there were voices in the night, that sounded faint and confused, somewhere in those depths.

With all the practical caution of a marketman hoisting a basket of eggs or a packer of fragile china or glass, the captain was arranging a nest for the contents of the case under the seamed and crumbling base of "Old Lone Tree," the name by which the rock had been known by several generations of mountaineers.

"Now, my lads," said the officer, "you need not hold the glimmers so close, and which, if they were ordinary candles, fifty yards would be all too near to this job."

While speaking, the soldier stepped to the rear of the ledge, unrolling as he moved the "harp-string" spiral, the holding end of which was attached

to a plug which the "miner" had inserted into one of the fissures in the hanging rock.

The captain turned a flashlight on the face of his watch, the hands of which indicated one of the wee small hours of the morning, shouldered alpenstock and rope coil, and abruptly directed the boys to precede him in the narrow path rounding and inclining from the foot of the crag.

Before the lads had accomplished more than a hundred feet of descent, their lingering companion was close behind them, and apparently in a great hurry to reach the next level, extending directly away from that side of the mountain where "Old Lone Tree" was yet enthroned.

"You're something of a slider, chief," mildly suggested Billy after the little party had scraped a ten-yard trail on sharply lowering ground space plentifully sprinkled with grit, the captain by greater weight and breadth cutting much the wider swathe.

The occasion did not seem to appeal to the soldier as worthy of a halt to exchange pleasantries. He proved on straight footing as lively a sprinter as he had been a slider, and the boys had to hump themselves to keep anyways near even in the race.

Then came a stop with heels for brakes. A peremptory challenge rang out from a ridge that just ahead crossed the path of the runners. If the sentry

had not seen anything to alarm he had certainly heard something that aroused him to alert suspicion.

"Who goes there?" The query was sprung by a Teuton tongue that had an edge on it.

As the captain did not propose to enlighten the fellow up above, he very promptly took to earth, the boys in a jiffy following suit.

"Who goes there?" Useless question number two.

There was a downfall of gravel, and the sudden illumination of a flare. The sentry was in descent and searching for the cause of the noise which had disturbed him.

Again the challenge, and now echoed by the next post on the ridge.

And this time an answer was in making—a shocker, too!

A column of fire reddened every mountain peak for miles around, accompanied by a tremendous detonation which reverberated in gorges far and near, with sound supplement of roaring and grinding that lasted more than a minute.

The trio prone upon the rocky surface of the plateau distinctly felt the tremble of the ground beneath them.

No further challenge held them land-locked, and what became of the approaching sentry and the

other guards on the ridge there was no telling this night.

"I guess we were in the little end of the horn after the big one blew out," was Billy's way of looking at it.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE KING'S MESSENGERS.

"THERE is one battery that has not been working to-day," observed Captain Bertelmo to Our Young Aeroplane Scouts, when the three participants in the mountain adventure of the night before met in camp after a triple sleeping match of six hours' duration.

The boys noted that the Italian forces were using the coveted roadway without the shelling that all previous attempts of the kind had invited.

It was not difficult to believe that anything in the way of that enforced rampage of "Old Lone Tree" and the balance of the avalanche material had surely been wiped off the map.

Judging from the racket raised by the captain's improvised mine, Billy and Henri would not, as the former claimed, have been overly surprised if the mountain itself "had fallen into a hole."

When next the aviators left camp it was a directed venture in which they were once more the solely responsible parties, and involved a biplane journey in territory over which they had never hitherto flown during their service with Italy's war eagles.

The mission, also, in mileage, could be anticipated as an endurance test, and the operators looked well and carefully after the essential details of equipment before starting on an aerial trip with bases of supply so far apart.

An orderly had advised the lads to hold themselves in readiness for departure at any moment, but with no intimation as to any fixed period when the order to start might be expected.

Of so much, however, Billy and Henri had some advance knowledge—they knew the trend of the proposed flight, the compass points they must observe and all advices as to the lay of the land which brief study of a military map could afford.

All the rest was guess work with the waiting birdmen, based on the vague belief that they were about to serve as the bearers of important dispatches, for they could conceive of no other assignment just then that would send them as far as the French border.

A little later our boys discovered that surmise had served them right in this instance. With the word that hastened their departure came a sealed bag, the importance of which was impressed by grave admonition to guard it as jealously as they would life itself, and on no account permit it to fall into alien hands. If by accident or otherwise such a happening should threaten, and absolutely no saving way,

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the command was to destroy, by any means at hand, the precious pouch.

"Just like real 'king's messengers' you read about, Buddy," remarked the Barry lad as the biplane lifted for its long flight.

"It's up to us to do better than the wires or the mail, Billy boy," sang out Henri when the machine got its bearings and was cutting the air like a knife.

Both of the young scouts had a thought apiece that somebody must have furnished a mighty strong recommendation to put them in line for a trust of this caliber. The mental credit probably went to Captain Bertelmo, for in the last new field of action which the boys were leaving the "Death Company" officer had been their best friend.

The course the biplane was pursuing ran parallel with the Swiss boundary, and over mountainous region for a considerable distance. Taking no chances of interference by aerial wanderers from Austria-Hungary, the messenger-aviators kept flight at great altitude until the necessity existed for descent on Italian soil in order to adjust some "kink" that had developed in the plane machinery.

On their map of travel the boys had checked the town of Novara for their first stopping point, expecting to locate it by its nearness to Milan, a city big enough to be recognized from above.

The biplane tanks had to be replenished with petrol from time to time, and owing to the hours

already spent aloft, one of those times was now due. But, with the driving power out of gear, the operators having no choice of place for immediate landing, came down in the open country for repairs, with slight chance of getting very much farther unless, as Billy remarked, when hitting the earth, "there's an oil well handy."

Of credentials, imperatively commanding the aid of every loyal Italian, the boys had each a pocketful, yet all of the document power would not amount to much in the way of quickly producing petrol where it could not possibly be produced.

Henri had no particular trouble in getting the machinery of the plane again in running order, and there was still enough fuel in the tanks to keep up a series of "hopping" flights, which carried the lads some ten or twelve miles westward and within distant view, looking from the higher ground attained, of a town of size, the spires of which glistened in the golden glow of the now slowly sinking sun.

"The bird is dead, pal," announced young Trouville, when the biplane settled from low flight on a grassy knoll, with motors silent and not an ounce of push by which to revive them.

"But for the trouble aft," lamented Billy, "we could have just about made the riffle, for I think that's the very town we're looking for over there."

"This isn't the first time we've seen the time-card mussed up," remarked Henri, who was digging

into the provision box, "and only a longer stop for lunch than we expected."

"You'll change your tune, young fellow," said the Bangor boy, "by the time we have hoofed it this night across that stretch of land. Some rough stepping there, believe me."

"'What can't be cured must be endured,'" quoted the youngster addressed. The situation had not at all affected his appetite.

With an emergency mission charged to them, Billy and Henri could not consistently linger at ease in this resting place, though provided with all they needed for a comfortable siesta. They must, perforce, move along, somehow or other, with all possible dispatch.

By special instructions the aviators had avoided the fighting centers in this region, and, that there were battle lines not so very far away to the north, accounted for the fact that from the time of alighting the boys considered no other plan than the one originally adopted—namely, follow the course of least risk and resistance, which meant make themselves as "scarce" as possible among armed camps.

"We'll have to put the machine under a bower of grass and tree branches and hike for the town; that's the bit set in our mouths, so let's prance, pal." Billy's declaration he supplemented by active effort in gathering concealing cover for the biplane.

"What about the dispatch pouch, Buddy?" questioned Henri.

"Bury it," was the prompt response. "We don't know what may happen on this walk. That's the safe side, anyway. With the bag in bank, even if it's only a sand one, it will be a mind reliever until we get off the ground again."

The lads, cheerfully accepting the final resort, trudged away through the lowering dusk in the direction of the town, to which they were presently guided by twinkling lights springing up in the distant darkness.

"It's a long way to Tipperary," commented Billy, "or, to fit the occasion, make it Novara. But here's a beaten road at last, praise goodness, and we'll save our shoes."

With quickened step, the pedestrians drew near to the end of their journey, and directly traversed the streets of the sleeping town.

With the paper-weight of authority in their jackets and their own hustling methods, the young scouts soon got a hearing from the authorities, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour. Declining invitation to accept a bed until daylight should show, the aviators by insistence and within a half hour after arrival were in a wagon, behind two good horses, which rapidly conveyed them and several cans of petrol back to the starting point of the early evening.

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Having thoroughly prepared for dawn-time departure, our boys surrendered to utter weariness, and, outstretched upon the grass, were lost to all material things for several hours.

Awakened by the sunlight shining upon their up-turned faces, the sleepers were afoot in a couple of seconds and seeking a little stream that wound like a thread through the matted grasses and trickled among the rocks in the lower ground. "Fit as a fiddle," rejoiced Billy, glowing from his face bath in spring-cold water. Henri, too, seemed to have forgotten the fatigue of that recent strenuous stroll, and when the boys climbed into the biplane they counted as good as made the next long run to Turin, that big and modern city of the famous cathedral, the royal palace, library, and armory, from where they were, according to the official memorandum, to be escorted to Lyons, France, by members of the aviation corps operating in northern Italy.

In the approach, and their first sight of French territory for quite awhile, the aerialists had a glimpse of some of Mont Blanc's sixteen thousand foot elevation.

With the promised company of fellow airmen, Billy and Henri completed the last leg of the dispatch-bearing journey in flight from Turin to the before mentioned French city, the great southern warehouse of the republic, some two hundred miles from Paris.

Here it was that the young scouts relinquished the custody of the sealed dispatch pouch to designated authority, and of its subsequent disposal they were not advised. Being acquitted with honor of this responsibility our boys had no further personal concern in it, but from the formality of receipt they judged that the documents delivered were surely of that particular moment and value ascribed to them by the forwarding officers.

Consulting the official memorandum prepared for their guidance, Billy and Henri had now to interpret a concluding clause—"and such further service as may be requested by Monsieur Lamonte."

"That's the man with the gray mustache and chin tuft," recalled the Bangor boy, "the one who took charge of the pouch after we turned it over to the secretary fellow this morning."

"He didn't say anything about holding us," argued Henri.

"Maybe not," asserted Billy, "but you must not forget what we were told by the boss aviator that came over from Turin with us. He said, you'll recollect, that we were to stay here until the close of the week, and at this address." The speaker produced a slip of paper for the inspection of his chum.

"I'm not minding," declared the latter, "it's a new town to yours truly, and it looks good to me.

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This is the place where they manufacture silk stuff by the mile."

In the evening of the third day of their sojourn in Lyons, the boys received their summons from the secretary of "Monsieur Lamonte," and the messenger had orders to bring the boys along with him to one of the big buildings near Place Bellecour, one of the largest and finest squares in all Europe.

The young aviators were officially advised that evening that they were to be entrusted with another sealed package to be delivered to a "high-up" in Rome, one of those consequential communications that go otherwise than by wire or mail. "Your reputation as trusty carriers is evidently pretty well established," observed the secretary, and further stating that the boys were to proceed by night train to Marseilles, where on the morrow they would take boat for the Italian capital.

"And the biplane?" interrogated Henri, the airman's first thought.

"Will be properly transported, too," smilingly replied the secretary.

The following day found the "king's messengers" in Marseilles, the principal commercial seaport of France on the Mediterranean. Under Billy's jacket was a leather case securely strapped and snugly fitting in the small of the back, and from which the boy had no intention of separating himself until

he should be relieved of its charge in the Eternal City.

When reporting by card to the first officer of the steamer on which they were to take passage, the boys began to appreciate that there was some distinction about their job, for courtesies came thick and fast, and they traveled with unlimited privileges, noting, too, the unobtrusive guarding by a pair of husky deckmen of their every movement.

"My dear duke," jollied Billy, touching his cap to his chum, "I hope that the janitor at the palace will not neglect to light a fire in the drawing room ere our return."

"I am more interested in what the cook may produce," laughed Henri.

Upon arrival at Rome, and with escort in waiting, the young scouts in their new rôle went straight to the "high-up" with that which they had to present, and when they left the palace the Bangor boy no longer wore a hump under his shoulders.

Also they had listened to gracious grant of furlough for a score of days.

What they should do with all that vacation proved a puzzle for the busy birdmen, the solution of which was unexpectedly advanced by the sailor, Hilary, whom the boys accidentally encountered the next morning on a bridge crossing the Tiber.

"Glory to my eyes for what they see," was the

heartly greeting of the seaman. "The army will go to ruin with you idle."

"The army has about three weeks to suffer," gaily answered Billy. "We've got our walking papers for that time."

"My star is in the ascendant," proclaimed Hilary. "There is nothing to prevent your going to Naples with me, is there? Tell me quick."

"Nothing but lack of inducement," assured Billy.

"How would a sea voyage in a tight little craft suit you? Captain Dirigo, who swears eternal friendship for you, will be in command."

"Same old cargo?" Henri put in the query for fun.

"Same old kind, but a new lot," confessed the sailor.

"It's a go, my bold mariner," happily assented the Bangor boy, who well knew that Henri and himself would soon tire of elegant leisure and sights seen over and over again.

The enthusiastic sailor hitched a grip to the arms of his young friends, as though he feared they would take wings and fly away from him, and until the three were off for Naples he never relaxed his good-humored surveillance.

Within a few hours Our Young Aeroplane Scouts were shaking the one hand of an eagle-eyed ship-master, who carried an empty sleeve on the left side

of a chest measure not often excelled between two human shoulders.

“Captain Dirigo, my lads; and these the youngsters, sir, who helped save the old ship.” Hilary made the introduction with his best flourish of speech.

CHAPTER XX.

FAREWELL TO THE ALPS.

"THE tight little craft" described by Hilary was something more than that—a good-sized ship, wonderfully like the *Helene*, which lost its rigging under bomb shower in the Adriatic.

"Mayhap you are wondering how it was that I got another vessel after my misfortune in the recent past," said Captain Dirigo to the boys on their first day out at sea. "But cripple though I am, and of record as leaving my ship while it was still afloat, the owners sent my resignation back to the hospital with the ink hardly dry on their refusal to accept and the blood hardly dry on my torn shoulder when I wanted to get up and dance for very joy."

"You did not leave your ship, sir," stoutly maintained Hilary, who, as mate, was standing nearby. "We lowered you, as dead to the world, into the longboat, and for days you did not know whether you were on land or sea."

"We turn back the clock again, my mate," remarked the captain. "I was only telling my young friends how I had been favored."

"Favor due, I think, to thirty years' service," muttered the mate, "and keeping some old hookers above water that were less than junk."

The vessel of which Captain Dirigo was now in command, chartered transport, had been one of the best in the trading service, steam driven and equipped with wireless apparatus, and defensive guns mounted fore and aft.

By the nature of her calling the ship could hardly claim immunity, it was not the spirit of the commander to cry for quarter from any craft he could not outsail or out-maneuver, and it can be said that only once had the captain been caught "with the goods," so to speak, and when and how has already been related.

Hilary had so much confidence in the chief's seamanship and marine adroitness that he had not hesitated a minute in asking our boys to take it as a pleasure trip, this proposed voyage "around the point" and into the Adriatic arm of the Mediterranean. Austrian aeroplanes were not prevalent on this particular coast, though Austrian submarines bobbed up occasionally within a day's range of Palermo.

"It's those pesky air things that I don't like," the mate was wont to declare, "for while they can easily get at you, it's mighty little chance you have to get back at them."

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"That's the nature of the beasts," Billy was wont to reply, in his bantering way.

Everything was going well with the staunch craft, the weather ideal—the "see-Naples-and-die" kind—and the young aviators were beginning to appreciate how good the air was when free of gunpowder and how fine a peaceful existence without ear-splitting explosions, blood and thunder.

Then, it seemed, something just had to happen to break the even tenor of such a happy voyage. The wireless operator on the *Dirigo* ship (*Romania*) was getting, from somewhere out in the Mediterranean, S. O. S. calls for help. Though still in the Tyrrhenian arm, and headed for Messina Strait, the captain altered the course of the vessel and ordered full speed southward into the Mediterranean. The wireless operator exchanged messages with other ships, and relayed several to the shore stations.

The boys, with intense interest, and as privileged characters on the *Romania*, hung around the youth at the key, getting from him the purport of every message.

"S. O. S. *Campagna*, submarine," flashed the wireless. Then "help!"

This last repetition was evidently the death cry from the now feebly recording batteries of the stricken boat far out to the southwest of Palermo,

for of this direct call no more was heard, though yet persistent were others of questioning nature.

Steaming with all power toward the position last given by the wireless plea, Captain Dirigo maintained a double lookout and had the small boats swung out on their davits.

The captain went as close to the *Campagnia's* stated position as he dared to take the *Romania*, slowed down and tried to find some trace of the vessel in distress or her boats, but to no avail. Not desiring to invite an attack upon his own vessel, Captain Dirigo turned the ship about and shaped return course to the north.

Neither Billy Barry nor Henri Trouville, singly or jointly, could then have stretched imagination to the degree of believing that this deviation from the originally planned course of the Italian ship, *Romania*, replying to wireless summons of dire emergency, would so vitally affect, as it did, their personal concerns.

The next hour's swift approach from the direction of Gibraltar of a cruiser, of the speed-burning type, excited no more than the idle interest of the young aviators perched on the taffrail of the *Romania*. It was not until the oncoming vessel showed the Union Jack at the fore that they condescended to open their eyes a bit.

"A Britisher!" exclaimed Billy.

"They're going to 'speak' us!" cried Henri.

Sure enough, the English vessel checked headway within shouting distance of the Italian ship, which had also hoisted colors.

From the cruiser a boat was lowered, and with an officer behind the pulling crew was quickly alongside the *Romania*. When the uniform reached the deck of the Dirigo craft, our boys instantly recognized the man inside of it—none other than the officer of the warship in the English Channel, with whom Anglin, the French secret agent, had taken counsel that dark night which marked the escape of the German spies in a submarine.

Billy and Henri had been present at that interview, and were sure in their claim of acquaintance.

Respectfully keeping in the background while Captain Dirigo and the visitor consulted about the wireless calls that had been filling the air, and of the probable fate of the vessel that had sounded the S. O. S., the young scouts stepped forward just as the two officers were exchanging parting salutes.

The lads, however, did not get in the first word of greeting. The Englishman started with surprise, and voiced it, too. "Well!" he said, in tone of amazement.

The shipmaster also wore an air of astonishment when he heard the exclamation, and observed that his young friends represented the cause of it.

"You have met before, signors?" he politely asked.

"I believe the young gentlemen will testify that we have," replied the Briton, now smiling.

"Sure pop, lieutenant," declared Billy, advancing with extended hand, which the officer as promptly grasped, and reaching again to give Henri the same friendly clasp.

"Come to think of it," continued the officer, "we have an order concerning two young men about your size—an order of recall, at the behest of one Captain Johnson, recently returned from the Dardanelles service, and now engaged in filling the government's rush orders for aeroplane building at Dover. Know him?"

"Do I know my uncle?" laughingly counter-questioned Billy. "But we're gaining weight, are we not, to be in such demand as all this?"

"The captain has, I understand," stated the lieutenant, "reported to London headquarters that yourself and your companion are just the experts he needs for the finer touches of construction, and as we had other business down this way we could pick you up as well as not."

"Misfortune and the fortune of this timely meeting were closely drawn," interposed Captain Dirigo. "But for the call of distress to which we responded, I fear the whereabouts of my young friends for a time would have been difficult for you, signor, to ascertain. The travel of this ship is not advertised."

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"And our stay in these waters is limited to only three days," remarked the Briton. "It was a near thing, all around."

With regretful good-byes to Captain Dirigo and the big-hearted sailor, Hilary, Billy and Henri, transferred to the cruiser, which immediately set out for Naples to conclude the arrangements by wire with Rome for the release of the young aviators from the Italian service, which would not prove difficult, as these experts were recruits by courtesy to Colonel Nicolini in time of need.

Though under a war-cloud, the memory of Naples that our boys carried away with them on leaving the next day, was that of a joy spot on the earth; for if woe and want were stalking, the darker way had a blaze of color in front of it—scarlet sashes, flaming bandana handkerchiefs, costumes that were riots of brilliant shades.

Out of the Mediterranean into the broad Atlantic, with a whole lot upon which to look back and, happily and hopefully, a brighter vista in the forward look and prospect of the sometime homeward-bound day, Our Young Aeroplane Scouts so completed their vivid campaign with the War Eagles of the Alps.

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